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The Ark of the Covenant and Divine Rage in the Hebrew Bible

ABSTRACT

The subject of my study is the Ark of the Covenant as portrayed within the Deuteronomistic History of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the tales featuring the Ark in Joshua and 1–2 Samuel. In these narratives, the God of Israel performs astonishing works through the Ark; from the Israelites' perspective, these deeds are sometimes miraculous and other times horrifying. I argue that the behavior of Yhwh's Ark may best be compared to that of a partially domesticated wild animal such as a horse. Like the raging energy of a horse, the violent supernatural power mediated through the Ark is an invaluable resource for human society; nonetheless, it is also unpredictable and extremely dangerous.

I take a comparative approach in interpreting the narratives of Joshua and 1–2 Samuel. I first discuss the Ark as Yhwh's throne in light of the Mesopotamian myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, which also features a divine throne. I suggest that the chair of Nergal in the Neo-Assyrian version of this tale acts as a violent border-crosser that enables Nergal to pass through the normally impenetrable borders of the Netherworld and dominate Queen Ereshkigal. Likewise, in the book of Joshua, the Ark (or throne) of Yhwh permits the Israelites to pass through barriers in a miraculous fashion and conquer the land of Canaan.

I go on to analyze the behavior of Yhwh's Ark as presented in the Ark Narrative of 1–2 Samuel. I compare the destructive rampage of the Ark to that of the god Erra as depicted in the Babylonian poem *Erra and Ishum* and conclude that the narrative of 1–2 Samuel does not attempt to justify the violence perpetrated through Yhwh's Ark. I examine David's heroism in settling the Ark in Jerusalem, which appears to effect a sort of taming, since afterward the Ark is never again explicitly described as a destructive force. I propose that, like *Erra and Ishum*, which was widely used as an amulet, the Ark Narrative may be understood as a textual means of protecting against the chaotic forces described therein.

Finally, I turn to consider the characterization of females in the Ark Narrative, drawing on Greek tragedy to illuminate the nature of divine wrath. I discuss Yhwh's angry outbursts through the Ark alongside the portrayal of the raging goddess Artemis in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy. In particular, I trace the image of the bit in *Oresteia*—the small metal object connecting the horse to its human rider. Instead of being placed in the mouth of a horse in the trilogy, however, the bit is figuratively applied to three subjugated females: a pregnant rabbit representing Troy, Iphigeneia, and Cassandra. In juxtaposing this tragic image with three scenes of afflicted females in the Ark Narrative—the wife of Phinehas, the lowing milch cows, and Michal—I seek to draw out an interpretation of the biblical narrative that is attentive to the emotional complexity of divine and human personalities.

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Sacred discourse lives in the closed flowers of its ambiguous or equivocal words, which unfurl in the mind of the reader only when his reading is as ambiguous as the sacred words themselves.

–Patricia Cox Miller[1]

Let us, then, open the starting-gates of speech, let us loosen the reins a little, and spur this discourse on as if we were riding a race-horse. And you, O Word of God—ride with me as my helper; give words to my stammering mind, make the track smooth for my speech, and lead my course straight towards your good pleasure, the goal of a wise person's every word and thought.

–Saint John of Damascus[2]

Writing, in its noblest function, is the attempt to unerase, to unearth, to find the primitive picture again, ours, the one that frightens us.

–Hélène Cixous[3]

[1] Patricia Cox Miller, *The Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity: Essays in Imagination and Religion* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 41.

[2] Saint John of Damascus, Homily II (Brian E. Daley, S. J., *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* [Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998], 204).

[3] Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers, Wellek Library Lectures at the University of California, Irvine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 9.

INTRODUCTION

THE INSCRUTABLE ACTS OF GODS AND HUMANS

Strange Human Behavior

It is a question that has almost certainly confounded all of us, whether the evidence comes from the grand theater of world events, the everyday maneuvering of traffic on our local roadways, or from our most intimate associations with others: Why is it that people sometimes act in ways that appear to be entirely senseless?

In his classic work, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), E. R. Dodds draws our attention to one way of answering this question from ancient Greece. Particularly within Homeric literature, inscrutable human behavior is explained as stemming from divine intervention: "We may sum up the result by saying that all departures from normal human behaviour whose causes are not immediately perceived, whether by the subjects' own consciousness or by the observation of others, are ascribed to a supernatural agency, just as is any departure from the normal behaviour of the weather or the normal behaviour of a bowstring."[1]

A similar view may be found in the Hebrew Bible, where baffling human behavior is frequently attributed to the deliberate intervention of the deity. An evil spirit from Yhwh torments Saul, throwing the king into bouts of depression and murderous rage (1 Sam 16:14–23; 18:10–11); Yhwh hardens the heart of Pharaoh so that he refuses to release the Israelites from Egypt, which leads to a thorough ravaging of his land (Exod 7:3–5); throngs of prophets convulse in a state of ecstatic divine possession (1 Sam 10:5–

[1] E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 13.

13). Paul Volz gives an evocative synopsis of the divine origins of abnormal human activity as presented in the Hebrew Bible:

> If among the inhabitants of a city a bitter dispute broke out and would not let up, or if a powerful person relentlessly persecuted a weak one like a storm against the feeble leaf, if a noble man became melancholy, if a person paced back and forth in violent unrest, or if someone was pigheaded in a decision and everyone saw that it would tear him to pieces, if someone was so entirely obstinate that no piece of advice had any effect on him, or if one encountered an ecstatic in a state of uncontrollably wild excitement, who incited war in a furious rage, or who charged about like a bull with its horns—then everyone would say: here Yahweh is at play; this person is possessed by Yahweh.[2]

The ancient Hebrew and Greek literature that describes such divine possession often includes a sensible account of the god's motivation for tampering with humans. Yhwh is said to harden Pharaoh's heart in the book of Exodus for a specific purpose: to give the deity an opportunity to perform wondrous acts that prove his power (Exod 7:3–5). In Euripides's *Hippolytus*, we learn that the goddess Aphrodite afflicts lady Phaedra with an overwhelming erotic attraction for her stepson Hippolytus in order to punish the young man for neglecting Aphrodite and worshiping only Artemis, virgin goddess of the hunt. In both of these cases, we see a deity actively plotting against particular humans, bringing them to ruin in order to advance the god's own cause. Whether the gods are

[2] Paul Volz, *Das Dämonische in Jahwe* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1924), 8. Translation from the original German is my own. Volz includes a footnote here indicating which biblical passages he is referring to:

> Discord in Shechem via an evil spirit of God (Judges 9:23); cf. the conflict between Saul and David (1 Sam 26:19: "Yahweh has stirred you up against me") and the hatred of Shimei against David (2 Sam 16:10: "Yahweh called Shimei to curse David"). Saul's melancholy is caused by the spirit of Yahweh (1 Sam 16:14 ff., 18:10, 19:9), as is Samson's agitation (Judges 13:25). Rehoboam's disastrous stubbornness was brought about by Yahweh (1 Kgs 12:15), as was the hardening of Pharaoh and the Elides, among others (Exod 4:21, 1 Sam 2:25, Deut 2:30, etc.). The ecstasy of the *navi*s and the war heroes, and militant furor come from the divine *ruach* (1 Sam 10:6, 19:20 ff., Judges 11:29, 14:19, 15:14, 1 Sam 11:6), as does the ecstatic *navi* Zachariah raging like a bull (1 Kgs 22:11).

justified in their interference is another question altogether; suffice it to say that a comprehensible divine motive is articulated in these texts.

When Gods Act Incomprehensibly

In other instances, a god's reason for manipulating humans is left unspecified. For example, in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Artemis is said to have been angry with Agamemnon and Menelaus for undertaking a military expedition against Troy, but we are not told why this angers her so.[3] Moreover, Artemis demands the sacrifice of Agamemnon's virgin daughter Iphigeneia in order to send winds that make the mission to Troy possible; yet the goddess subsequently punishes Agamemnon for fulfilling her own gruesome request. Similarly, towards the end of David's kingship, Yhwh becomes enraged at Israel for unspecified reasons; we are simply told that ויסף אף־יהוה לחרות בישׂראל, "The wrath of Yhwh again burned against Israel" (2 Sam 24:1).[4] In his wrath, Yhwh incites David to count the people of Israel and Judah, but then punishes the people severely when the king counts them in compliance with the divine command, sending a pestilence that kills seventy thousand Israelites (2 Sam 24:15).

If a person (or an animal[5], or the weather[6]) acts unnaturally, in a way that is not readily comprehensible, it is possible to make sense of what is otherwise apparently

[3] We will discuss *Agamemnon* and the other works of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy at greater length in chapter 5.

[4] Translations from the Hebrew Bible are mine unless otherwise noted.

[5] The lion that stands next to the donkey and the torn corpse of the prophet in 1 Kgs 13:24–25 without eating the available meat emphasizes that the attack was orchestrated by the deity.

[6] E.g., the wadi that fills with water at Yhwh's command in 2 Kgs 3:17–20, even though there was no rain or dew.

senseless by attributing such an occurrence to divine interference. It may thus be admitted that a certain act contradicts the established nature or interests of the actor while maintaining that the act still makes sense, in that it can be understood as serving the interests of a powerful external being who is using the actor to accomplish his or her purposes. On the other hand, when a god is experienced as behaving in a confounding way that seems contrary to that god's usual character or expressed interests, it may well be asked: What got into the deity?

This meta-metaphysical question pushes the boundaries of our imaginative understanding. It is the central question of the present study, which focuses on the characterization of the Ark of the Covenant within the Deuteronomistic History of the Hebrew Bible. In the books of Joshua and 1–2 Samuel, the Ark of Yhwh is presented as a holy object animated by supernatural powers that are often destructive. The violent energy of the Ark sometimes works to the advantage of the Israelites, as in the book of Joshua, when Yhwh performs wonders through the Ark that make it possible for the Israelites to conquer the land of Canaan. The Ark of Yhwh functions as a heroic warrior here; it is an invaluable resource to Israelite society.

In 1–2 Samuel, on the other hand, the raging energy of the Ark runs amok when the Ark is taken from its place in Shiloh and brought to the battlefield. The Philistines capture the Ark, but soon regret having done so when their battle trophy turns on them and torments their cities with plagues. They rid themselves of the Ark by sending it back to Israelite territory. Instead of settling happily back into its homeland, however, Yhwh's Ark continues to rage. Upon the return of the Ark to Beth-Shemesh, and amid much rejoicing, Yhwh is said to slay multitudes of adoring Israelites כי ראו בארון יהוה, "because

they looked upon the Ark of Yhwh" (1 Sam 6:19). After this horrific incident, the residents of Beth-Shemesh banish the Ark from their town.

Decades later, when David becomes king of Israel, he attempts to bring the Ark of Yhwh to his new capital, Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6). Along the way, and again amid great rejoicing, the oxen stumble, and one of the attendants, Uzzah, reaches out his hand and seizes hold of the Ark, presumably to steady it. What appears to be the instinctive and solicitous reaction of a loyal servant inflames the anger of the deity, who strikes Uzzah dead. David in turn is angered by this divine outburst, and he despairs that he may not be able to bring the Ark to Jerusalem. Eventually, however, the king succeeds in bringing the Ark to Jerusalem and settling it there.

Rage as Illness

In ancient Greek literature, wrath itself sometimes plays a starring role. Anger is presented as a proper character in the *Iliad* as well as in the tragedies of Aeschylus, with real energy and influence. *Mēnis*, or "rage," is the first word of the *Iliad*, a work that charts the brutal course of anger between divine and human realms: "Anger [*Mēnis*], goddess, sing it, of Achilles son of Peleus—disastrous anger that made countless pains for the Achaeans, and many steadfast lives it drove down to Hādēs, heroes' lives, but their bodies it made prizes for dogs and for all birds."[7] Like a disease, this *mēnis* is highly contagious and can ravage entire communities.

[7] The Homeric *Iliad*, Scroll 1:1–5, trans. Samuel Butler, from Gregory Nagy's online *Sourcebook of Ancient Greek Texts in English Translation* for his Harvard course, CB22x: "The Ancient Greek Hero," online: https://courses.edx.org/courses/HarvardX/CB22.1x/2013_SOND/htmlbook/1/.

P. Kyle McCarter has observed that, in ancient Near Eastern literature, raging gods are sometimes described as suffering from an illness: "In the case of the Ugaritic gods, to be in a state of anger was to be 'sick' or 'unwell,' so that their behavior was unpredictable and dangerous. They were, as we might put it, 'not themselves' until their anger was appeased and they returned to a state of normalcy."[8] In the Ugaritic Baal epic, for example, Anat is introduced as a volatile goddess who indulges in warfare. She embarks on a battle spree in the valley, slaughtering humans so furiously that "Heads rolled under her like clods," and then adorning her body with the bloody heads and hands of her victims. When she returns home, her lust for battle is still unsatisfied and so she sets up her furniture, her tables and chairs, as warriors and slays them, wallowing in the carnage she produces in her living room.

It is no wonder, then, that her father El is frightened when Anat confronts him in a rage, demanding he permit a temple to be built for Baal. If he doesn't grant her request, she swears things will get ugly: "My father, El the Bull, will answer me, he'll answer me … or else, I'll push him to the ground like a lamb. I'll make his gray hair run with blood, his gray beard with gore."[9] When El hears Anat coming, he hides and only addresses her from within eight enclosures, saying: "I know you, my daughter, that you are not well, that among the goddesses there is none more upset than you."[10] McCarter observes that Anat's anger is described here as a sickness, a spirit that comes over her like a fever.

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[8] P. Kyle McCarter, "When the Gods Lose Their Temper: Divine Rage in Ugaritic Myth and the Hypostasis of Anger in Iron Age Religion," in *Divine Wrath and Divine Mercy in the World of Antiquity*, ed. Reinhard G. Kratz and Hermann Spieckermann (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 78–91, at 87.

[9] Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith, eds., *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 123.

[10] Ibid., 81.

Anat appears to be very angry when she charges at her father, but when slaying her enemies, she couldn't be happier: "her heart swelled with laughter, her heart was filled with joy, Anat's soul was exuberant, as she plunged knee-deep into the soldiers' blood."[11] Regardless of the attitude she holds on either occasion, the goddess can accurately be described, both in the confrontation with El and in her murderous escapades, as "raging." Rather than referring to a particular feeling, rage can denote a certain mode of behavior, an abnormally energized state of physical aggression. Anat's rage, especially on the battlefield, is more like a manic episode than an emotion.

As we have noted, the God of the Hebrew Bible is also prone to bouts of anger, but the reason for his provocation is not always clear. In 2 Samuel 6, for example, we are told that Yhwh is angry when Uzzah touches the Ark, but we do not know precisely why this should infuriate him. In 1 Samuel 6, by contrast, we are not given any insight as to Yhwh's emotional state when he slays the citizens of Beth-Shemesh. In this case, we cannot conclude that Yhwh must have been angry simply because he acted destructively. Throughout this study, I treat rage not so much as an emotion but as a state of hyper-energized, impulsive aggression. Even if we cannot presume to know how Yhwh was feeling at Beth-Shemesh, then, it is nevertheless appropriate to regard Yhwh's behavior in the Ark Narrative of 1–2 Samuel as that of a raging deity.

Divine Wrath and Apophatic Theology

The majority of biblical scholars who have treated the Ark Narrative attempt to explain the violent behavior of Yhwh's Ark in 1–2 Samuel, usually with the goal of exculpating

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[11] Ibid., 91.

the deity by showing that he acted according to a previously established rule. Instead of attempting to show that the divine destruction perpetrated through the Ark in these episodes is not in fact arbitrary, my study examines the workings and effects of divine rage as presented in the narrative. As such, I consider my objective to be similar to that of the chorus in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* who sing a reverent hymn to Zeus. As Martha Nussbaum has noted, the purpose of their song is to "ask, through mythological imagination, what this god can be like and what he means to show us by his violence."[12]

In *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Rudolf Otto observes that the incomprehensible nature of Israel's deity is best expressed through his displays of wrath: "it is patent from many passages of the Old Testament that this 'wrath' has no concern whatever with moral qualities. There is something very baffling in the way in which it 'is kindled' and manifested. … Something supra-rational throbs and gleams, palpable and visible, in the 'wrath of God,' prompting to a sense of 'terror' that no 'natural' anger can arouse."[13] If the very incomprehensibility of Yhwh's wrath enhances his terrifying numinous splendor, then interpretations that seek to rationalize this wrath risk diminishing God's grandeur. Scholars who engage in such methods would do well to heed the Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, who warns: "Be sure that your theory of God does not lessen God."[14] Particularly when treating baffling texts such as the Ark Narrative, then, it may be advisable to proceed according to the principles of *apophasis*, that is, "unsaying or

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[12] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 42.

[13] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 18–19.

[14] Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, 3rd ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), 6.8(39).21, 28.

negating positive statements"[15] with regard to the deity's behavior. That is, we must not presume we will be able to achieve knowledge of every aspect of the divine personality.

Some contemporary scholars have attempted to apply apophatic theology to other biblical texts, as does Gary A. Anderson in his recent discussion of the mysterious divine outburst against Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10.[16] Although a few scholars advocate preserving mystery with regard to the divine behavior described in the Ark Narrative, most immediately set out to provide reasons for Yhwh's violence here. Even Anderson takes it for granted that the Ark Narrative is a tale of human sin and divine punishment.[17] I will discuss various theological interpretations of the Ark Narrative at length in chapter 4, but for now I conclude by following Augustine, who said of his written meditation on the Trinity: "not that [the mystery] might be spoken, but that it not be left unspoken"; that is, "he spoke only in order not to remain completely silent."[18]

The Raging Ark of Yhwh

It is significant that the primary lens through which we will consider divine wrath in this study is an object, the Ark of the Covenant. In order to discuss the characterization of the Ark in the Deuteronomistic History, it will be necessary to begin by examining its form and function in the Hebrew Bible as a whole. We undertake this project in chapter 1. We

[15] Patricia Cox Miller, *The Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity: Essays in Imagination and Religion* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 4.

[16] Gary A. Anderson, "'Through Those Who Are Near to Me, I Will Show Myself Holy': Nadab and Abihu and Apophatic Theology," *CBQ* 77 (2015): 1–19.

[17] See ibid., 3.

[18] Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Melody of Theology: A Philosophical Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 7.

then proceed to analyze the Ark as a divine throne in Joshua (chapter 2). In the course of conquering the land of Canaan, Yhwh performs miraculous acts of border crossing through the Ark. I compare the function of the Ark in Joshua to that of Nergal's chair in the Mesopotamian myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, making a case that this chair played an important role in permitting Nergal to cross the borders of the Netherworld at will.

In Joshua, the violent energy of the Ark is highly prized by the Israelites. In the Ark Narrative of 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6, however, the raging Ark emerges as a locus of erratic destruction. We first investigate the complex relationship between Yhwh and his Ark (chapter 3) before delving into a theological discussion of the Ark Narrative (chapter 4). Here I will argue that Yhwh does not act in a predictable manner through his Ark. Rather, the behavior of Yhwh's Ark is more like that of a partially domesticated animal, such as a horse. I compare the destructive rampage of the Ark to that of the god Erra as depicted in the Babylonian poem *Erra and Ishum* and suggest that, like Ishum, David performs a heroic role in his efforts to subdue the violent Ark.

Finally, in chapter 5, I turn to consider the characterization of females in the Ark Narrative, drawing on Greek tragedy to illuminate further the nature of divine wrath as presented in the Ark Narrative. I discuss Yhwh's angry outbursts through the Ark alongside the portrayal of the raging goddess Artemis in the *Oresteia* trilogy of Aeschylus. Here, instead of focusing on the male heroes who confront raging gods, I consider the females whose broken wombs suffer and transmit divine wrath in these tales. Specifically, I trace the image of the bit in the *Oresteia*, which three times is figuratively applied to subjugated females: the pregnant rabbit representing Troy, Iphigeneia, and Cassandra. In juxtaposing this tragic image with three scenes of afflicted females in the

Ark Narrative—the wife of Phinehas, the lowing milch cows, and Michal—I seek to draw out an interpretation of the biblical narrative that is attentive to the emotional complexity of divine and human personalities.

CHAPTER 1

THE FORM AND HISTORY OF THE BIBLICAL ARK

Historical vs. Literary Objects

When asked about the topic of this study, and I respond that I am writing about the Ark of the Covenant, it is usually assumed that my interest is in the Ark as a historical object. That is, what was the actual physical Ark like? And, more importantly, when will I find it?

But as thrilling as it would be if the Ark of the Covenant were unearthed, this is not the objective of my undertaking. Certainly many dissertations would be spawned by such a significant archaeological find. And yet the questions I am exploring in this study would remain largely unaffected by the discovery. In other words, it would not be possible to verify or refute the claims I am making solely on the basis of an archaeological find. Indeed, my analysis does not even depend on the historical existence of any such Ark.

This is because I approach the Ark of the Covenant as a literary object. Whatever the nature or reality of the historical artifact, I hold that the Ark's character and function in the Hebrew scriptures are themselves worthy of analysis. I am asking how the Ark was imagined from certain literary perspectives, which is not identical with the question of what the Ark may have been, historically speaking.

Here I would like to emphasize that the perceived form of the Ark is related to its perceived function. And yet the form of the Ark as presented in biblical literature is not necessarily identical with the historicity of that form. It may be helpful to illustrate these

statements with a concrete example. In chapter 2, I analyze the Ark as a divine throne in the book of Joshua. This conceptual form—the Ark as throne—is key to my analysis here, in that it serves as the basis for comparing the Ark to other supernatural thrones in ancient Mesopotamian literature, especially the chair of Nergal as featured in the Neo-Assyrian myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. If the Ark of the Covenant was discovered and it does not appear to be shaped like a throne, would this render my analysis false? On the other hand, if this hypothetical Ark did resemble a throne, would it prove that my argument is true? Given my position as defendant of this view, it is tempting to answer the latter question in the affirmative. And in fact, the physical shape of such an artifact might be used to inform textual analysis. It would constitute evidence for a particular view of the Ark's form in a particular time and place—and this concrete form may correspond to or elucidate a certain textual description of the Ark—but it would not prove that this is how the Ark was imagined by other biblical authors.

Although I have just explained that the objective of my study is not to pursue the historical Ark, nevertheless historical and literary questions are often related. We have acknowledged that the function of the Ark may be determined in part by its form; so too, what we say about the literary characterization of the Ark may in some cases depend on how we untangle the historical relationship among various biblical texts that describe it.

The Biblical Story of the Ark: A Brief Biography

Before launching into a detailed discussion of the form and function of the Ark, it may be helpful to give a brief overview of the Ark in Israelite history according to various biblical accounts. For the moment, we will overlook the fact that these accounts are taken

from different literary sources that occasionally contradict each other. We will simply provide a synchronic summary of the Ark's "biography," so to speak, as presented in the Hebrew Bible.

To tell the basic story, then: On the way out of their captivity in Egypt, the Israelites experience a theophany at Mount Sinai, where Yhwh establishes a covenant with the Israelite people. When Moses is on the mountain, Yhwh reveals to him the law and gives him detailed guidelines for the construction of a tabernacle to house the divine presence, as well as for the furnishings of the tabernacle, including the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25).

The Ark of the Covenant contains the tablets of the law and accompanies the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings. Yhwh is said to speak with Moses from between the wings of the cherubim that extend over the Ark (Exod 25:22, Num 7:89). According to Lev 16:2, Yhwh appears in a cloud over the cover of the Ark. The Ark leads the Israelites through the desert like a fearsome warrior: ויהי בנסע הארן ויאמר משה קומה יהוה ויפצו איביך וינסו משנאיך מפניך, "Whenever the Ark set out, Moses would say, 'Rise up, O Yhwh! May your enemies scatter! May your adversaries flee before you!'" (Num 10:35). It appears that Yhwh was regarded as fighting on behalf of the Israelites from or through the Ark, both in the wilderness (Num 14:44) and after they are settled in the land of Canaan (1 Sam 4:2–9; 2 Sam 11:11).

In the book of Joshua, the Ark is a central figure in the story of the Israelites' conquest of Canaan. Through it, Yhwh performs wonders that allow the Israelites to take over territory after years of wandering through the desert. When the feet of the priests who carry the Ark touch the Jordan River, its rushing waters stand still so that the

Israelites can cross over and enter the land of Canaan (Joshua 3–4). The Ark is also featured in the account of the conquest of Jericho, the Canaanite city whose massive walls purportedly crumble after the Ark is paraded around it seven times (Joshua 6). When the Israelites settle in the land of Canaan, the Ark is located for some time at Bethel, where oracles from Yhwh are received through it (Judges 20:26–28).

If the Ark serves an important function in the account of the Israelites' transition from a nomadic people to a settled nation, it also figures prominently in the narratives describing their transition from a tribal confederacy to a monarchy in 1–2 Samuel. At the start of 1 Samuel, which is set in the pre-monarchical period, the Ark is kept in a sanctuary at Shiloh, where the priest Eli tends to it, along with his sons, Hophni and Phinehas (1 Samuel 1–3). After being defeated in battle against the Philistines, the Israelites decide to bring the Ark of Yhwh from Shiloh to accompany them in battle, hoping it would lead them to victory. Instead, however, this military engagement ends catastrophically. Moreover, the Philistines manage to capture the Ark of the Covenant (1 Samuel 4).

After being carried off to Philistine territory, the Ark of Yhwh emerges as a sinister presence. The Philistine god Dagon is the first to suffer Yhwh's wrath; having placed the Ark in Dagon's temple, the Philistines awake to find the statue of their god collapsed before the Ark with severed head and hands (1 Sam 5:1–5). Yhwh plagues the cities of the Philistines relentlessly until they beg for the Ark to be expelled. The residents of the Israelite town of Beth-Shemesh would soon echo this request, since upon the Ark's return from Philistine territory and amid great rejoicing, multitudes of Israelites

drop dead after gazing upon the Ark (1 Sam 6:19–21).[19] Following this disaster, the Ark is taken to the Israelite town of Kiriath-jearim and is placed in the house of Abinadab on the hill, where it remains for some twenty years (1 Sam 7:1–2).

When King David establishes Jerusalem as his capital, he is determined to secure the presence of the Ark in his city, even after the unfortunate incident involving Uzzah, who is killed when he reaches out his hand to steady the Ark in the process of transporting it there (2 Samuel 6). Eventually David succeeds in settling the Ark in Jerusalem, but it is his son, King Solomon, who provides a more permanent dwelling place for the Ark when he builds the Temple. After Solomon ushers the Ark into the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 8), it is scarcely mentioned again in the biblical history of Israel.

There may be some indirect references to the Ark in later biblical narratives, however, and the mention of the Ark in Jeremiah (Jer 3:16) could be taken as evidence that the Ark was regarded as a powerful presence in Jerusalem up to the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. Curiously, though, the Ark does not appear in the lists of items looted by the Babylonians when they destroy the Solomonic Temple (2 Kgs 25:13–17; Jer 52:17–23). What finally became of the Ark, then, is a mystery.

If we wish to speak of the life of the Ark in biographical terms, we might sum up its story as follows. The Ark of the Covenant was born on a mountain. It spent its youth wandering in the desert, valiantly leading the Israelites through the wilderness for forty years. In its prime, the Ark was a bold and mighty warrior, cutting through rivers and breaking down walls. In midlife we might say that the Ark suffered a crisis, going berserk

[19] This episode is the basis for the climactic scene in the Indiana Jones film, where the Nazis who steal the Ark suffer gruesome deaths; as a result of looking into the Ark, their faces melt and their heads explode.

and killing Israelites and Philistines alike. In settling the raging Ark within the Jerusalem Temple, the Davidic dynasty ushers the Ark into a kind of retirement home, where it lives out its elderly years benignly until it mysteriously dies or disappears. Much like its "father," Moses, no one knows where the remains of the Ark lie to this very day.[20]

In Search of the Ark of the Covenant

Within the Hebrew Bible, we find several apparently contradictory physical descriptions of the Ark of the Covenant. If we set out to find the historical Ark, we would first have to figure out which one (or which combination) of these descriptions is likelier to correspond to historical reality. Otherwise, it would be impossible to identify any single artifact as the Ark, or even to know what we were looking for. If we approach the text from the perspective of a literary critic, it might also be necessary to evaluate different biblical representations of the Ark to determine how the Ark is being imagined within a given passage.

The aspiring treasure hunter and the literary critic may have entirely different goals. Nevertheless, one who seeks the historical Ark and one who analyzes its literary representation share similar concerns and evidence. In order to examine how their concerns might diverge and overlap, let's begin by adopting the outlook of a prospective treasure hunter. This adventurer wants to find the historical Ark of the Covenant. Above all, he is concerned with two questions: where to look and what to look for. In an attempt

[20] According to 2 Macc. 2:4–5, in fact, Jeremiah is supposed to have hidden and sealed the Ark in a secret cave near the mountain where Moses died. In this story, some of the prophet's followers tried to track his path so they would be able to find the Ark, but Jeremiah chastised them, proclaiming: "The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated" (2 Macc. 2:7–8, NRSV).

to discern whatever happened to the Ark of the Covenant, he studies the biblical record carefully. (Here we should point out that the story of the Ark and its history are both derived primarily from the same text, the Hebrew Bible.) He is not overly concerned with the tales of the Ark in the wilderness or its pre-monarchic wandering; rather, he focuses his attention on the biblical book of Kings in order to determine the fate of the Ark after Solomon places it in the Temple in Jerusalem. Let's follow his textual journey and see what we can learn regarding the fate of the historical Ark.

I would like to note at the outset that it is not my intention to argue for or against the historicity of these biblical texts. Rather, I am hoping to highlight the difficulty of a straightforward interpretation of biblical accounts that are potentially related to how the Ark was conceived throughout the history of Israel. Of course, it is particularly challenging to trace the fate of the Ark installed in Solomon's Temple, since the Ark is not explicitly mentioned thereafter in the history of the Israelite monarchy as presented in the book of Kings.[21]

The Possibility of Multiple Historical Arks

First, we should point out to our treasure hunter that his hope to unearth *the* Ark of the Covenant assumes there was one, and only one, historical object to which our texts refer. But how do we know there was only ever one Ark? It is possible that several different arks existed in the history of Israel, either simultaneously or in succession, and the form

[21] For a detailed evaluation of numerous traditions (biblical and otherwise) regarding the fate of the Ark, see John Day, "Whatever Happened to the Ark of the Covenant?" in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 250–70.

of these arks may not have been identical. It is also possible that a historical ark never existed at all. For now, we will proceed under the assumption that there was at least one physical Ark that existed in Israelite history.

In Jeremiah 3, the prophet speaks of a time when the Ark of Yhwh would be forgotten, and none other would be made:

והיה כי תרבו ופריתם בארץ בימים ההמה נאם־יהוה לא־יאמרו עוד ארון ברית־יהוה ולא יעלה על־לב ולא יזכרו־בו ולא יפקדו ולא יעשׂה עוד׃

"And when you increase and bear fruit in the land, in those days, says Yhwh, people will no longer say, 'The Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh.' It will not be cherished, and no one will remember it or miss it. Nor shall another be made" (Jer 3:16).

This statement points to a possibility of rebuilding the Ark of Yhwh, and could be taken to suggest that multiple arks had already been constructed to replace predecessors that had been destroyed in the past. According to Jer 1:2–3, Jeremiah prophesied from the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign (627 BCE) until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah's (586 BCE)—that is, immediately before and up to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. The statement in Jer 3:16 has been taken as evidence that the Ark of the Covenant was still in the Temple or had only recently been lost at the time Jeremiah 1 was composed.[22]

[22] John Day, for example, concludes from these verses: "Clearly therefore we catch a glimpse here of the coming to terms with the loss of the ark in the exilic period, which suggests that it had disappeared not long before, presumably in 586 BCE. The words 'it shall not be made again' clearly rule out its merely having been hidden or taken into exile, and presuppose its destruction" (Day, "Whatever Happened to the Ark of the Covenant?" 263).

We have evidence from elsewhere in the ancient Near East that certain pieces of divine furniture were replaced after the original suffered irreparable damage in the midst of human conflicts. As I have discussed in a previous article, the bed of Marduk played an important role in Mesopotamian politics in the seventh century BCE.[23] To summarize the situation briefly: Marduk's bed was taken as a battle trophy from Babylon by the dominant Assyrian forces led by Sennacherib in 689 BCE. The Assyrians returned Marduk's bed to Babylon as a conciliatory gesture in 654 BCE; soon afterward, however, the same bed was destroyed when the Assyrians attacked and burned the city. After the conflicts abated, Ashurbanipal reportedly built another bed for Marduk to replace the one that his troops had demolished. It is possible that the second bed of Marduk represented a new and improved version, as some evidence suggests it may have been slightly larger than the bed it replaced.[24]

So, too, it is conceivable that the Ark of Yhwh may have suffered damage in raids on Jerusalem by enemy forces, and afterward was rebuilt in a somewhat different form. To set this possibility in a more specific historical context, I will enumerate several biblical accounts describing instances in which the Ark of the Solomonic Temple may have been captured or damaged prior to the complete destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians. Our would-be treasure hunter should pay close attention here, since these texts could offer clues regarding where the "lost Ark" might be found.

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[23] See Maria (Metzler) Lindquist, "King Og's Iron Bed," *CBQ* 73 (2011): 477–92.

[24] Ibid., 480n12, 484–85.

1. The Attack of Shishak (Sheshonq I)

In 1 Kgs 14:25–26, we read about the Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak attacking Jerusalem. This event is presented as having occurred in the tenth century, around 926 BCE, during the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam.

25 ויהי בשנה החמישית למלך רחבעם עלה שישק מלך מצרים על ירושלם **26** ויקח את אצרות בית יהוה
ואת אוצרות בית המלך ואת הכל לקח ויקח את כל מגני הזהב אשר עשה שלמה

"In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak King of Egypt came up against Jerusalem. He took the treasures of the house of Yhwh, as well as the treasures of the house of the king; he took everything. He also took all the gold shields that Solomon had made" (1 Kgs 14:25–26).[25]

Although the biblical text does not specify that the Ark of the Covenant was captured in this raid, nevertheless if King Shishak really took *all* the treasures of Yhwh's Temple, then it seems the Ark would surely have been included among the plundered valuables. (And yet we should bear in mind throughout this discussion that if the Ark of the Temple did in fact correspond to the description of its form in Deut 10:1–5, then perhaps such a simple wooden box would not have even been considered a treasure worthy of plunder.) Some scholars hold that the original Ark of the Covenant was taken from Israel at this time, and that afterward the object only lived on as an ideal throughout the remaining years of the Israelite monarchy. This may be why we hear so little about the Ark in the biblical text following the account of it being placed in the Temple by King Solomon. In the popular Steven Spielberg film, *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the

[25] A nearly identical account of the event appears in 2 Chron 12:9.

archaeologist Indiana Jones uses this biblical text as a clue that he should search for the lost Ark in Egypt, and he does in fact find it there, in the city of Tanis.

If we take 1 Kgs 14:25–26 to be historically credible, then, one possibility is that Shishak, Pharaoh of Egypt, plundered the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem, and that it was lost ever afterward. Another possibility is that Shishak captured the Ark of Yhwh but that another Ark was constructed (either by Rehoboam or by a subsequent ruler) to replace the Ark that had been taken.[26] If so, then perhaps this is what Jeremiah refers to when he declares that, in the future, no other Ark would be built. In fact, the next verse in this passage states that Rehoboam constructed replacements for some of the treasures taken by Shishak, the gold shields of Solomon:

27 ויעש המלך רחבעם תחתם מגני נחשת והפקיד על יד שרי הרצים השמרים פתח בית המלך

"King Rehoboam made bronze shields to replace them, which he committed to the hands of the officers who guarded the entrance of the king's house" (1 Kgs 14:27).

Of course, the Ark is not mentioned specifically here, neither among the objects plundered nor those replaced. But the text provides evidence that treasures looted from Jerusalem might be remade and treated in the same manner as the originals. If Shishak did take the Ark, and the Ark was subsequently replaced, would the replacement have been identical with the original? Perhaps just as Rehoboam made substitute shields out of less costly material (bronze instead of gold), so too the new Ark may not have been quite as opulent as the one installed in the Temple by Solomon.

[26] Sigmund Mowinckel supports the view that the Ark was taken by Shishak but replaced thereafter. Mowinckel believes that this replacement Ark remained in the Temple until the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE (Sigmund Mowinckel, "Wann wurde der Jahwekultus in Jerusalem offiziell bildlos?" *AcOr* 8 [1930]: 257–79).

We should also bear in mind that, here and elsewhere, the biblical text might not accurately reflect the historical situation. In this case, we have access to Egyptian evidence that appears to contradict the biblical record of events.[27] At the very least, it does not support the account of the Egyptian invasion as described in 1 Kings 14. The Egyptian ruler called by the name of Shishak in the Hebrew Bible has been identified as Pharaoh Shoshenq I, who reigned from ca. 945 to 924 BCE. On a wall in the temple of Karnak, Shoshenq commemorated his campaign to Palestine. Shoshenq's wall is designed according to the typical tripartite structure of New Kingdom triumphal reliefs: it contains a conquest scene, an inscription, and a list of place names. Jerusalem is not named in the topographical list, nor is any other major site in the Judean highlands.

Based on the testimony of the Karnak temple relief, many scholars have concluded that Shoshenq/Shishak never entered Jerusalem,[28] or at least that Judah was not the focus of the Pharaoh's Palestinian campaign.[29] But should the biblical account of the event be entirely disregarded in light of this evidence? We might wonder why the author of 1 Kgs 14:25–26 would claim that Shishak had attacked Jerusalem if in fact he hadn't. It would seem to make more sense for an invaded city to downplay the details of

[27] For a thorough discussion of how the Egyptian evidence relates to the biblical account, see A. D. H. Mayes, "The Palestinian Campaign of Pharaoh Shishak," in *On Scroll and Stone: Essays in Honour of Graham Ivor Davies*, ed. James K. Aitken, Katharine J. Dell, and Brian A. Mastin (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 55–68.

[28] Menahem Haran believes Shishak did not attack Jerusalem but proposes that Rehoboam might have simply surrendered a large quantity of valuables as tribute to the Egyptian Pharaoh, perhaps to avoid a siege on the city (Menahem Haran, "The Disappearance of the Ark," *IEJ* 13 [1963]: 46–58, at 56). In Haran's view, the Ark would not have been among the valuables surrendered to Shishak. This conclusion is based on his interpretation of the word אצרות in verse 26, which may denote either "treasures" or "treasuries" in Biblical Hebrew. Haran takes the word to mean "treasuries" and therefore interprets the phrase ויקח את אצרות בית יהוה to indicate the emptying of a specific part of the Temple where valuables were kept rather than a comprehensive looting of the Temple.

[29] This is the conclusion of Mayes ("The Palestinian Campaign of Pharaoh Shishak," 63–64).

its subjugation than for an unscathed city to claim it had been attacked and plundered. Other scholars point out that the relief of Shoshenq is highly conventional and was not intended to serve as a comprehensive historical record.[30] Moreover, some of the original names of the topographical list are no longer visible, so it is possible that Jerusalem was listed there at an earlier time.[31] Thus, the biblical account and the Egyptian account may be judged as not wholly incompatible. That is, Shosenq might have in fact attacked Jerusalem even though the city is not included in his extant list of conquered cites. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that the Karnak temple relief does not corroborate the biblical record of events.

2. The Attack of Jehoash

Another raid on the Jerusalem Temple, this time in the eighth century, is recounted in 2 Kgs 14:8–14, following a military confrontation between King Jehoash of the northern kingdom of Israel and King Amaziah of Judah. The southern kingdom lost the battle, and Jehoash is said to have destroyed the wall of Jerusalem and to have looted the Temple:

ולקח את־כל־הזהב־והכסף ואת כל־הכלים הנמצאים בית־יהוה ובאצרות בית המלך ואת בני התערבות וישׁב שׁמרונה׃

"He took all the gold and silver and all of the items that were found in the house of Yhwh, and in the treasuries of the king's house, as well as the captives. Then he returned to Samaria" (2 Kgs 14:14).

[30] See ibid., 58–63.

[31] Of the 175 estimated total names, 127 are legible.

Again, this biblical text states that all the valuables were plundered from Yhwh's Temple in Jerusalem. And again, the Ark of the Covenant is not specifically mentioned, but it would presumably have been included among "all the items" that were located in the house of Yhwh. If the Ark had already been taken during the raid of Shishak, then perhaps it was no longer in the Temple when Jehoash invaded. If, however, that Ark had been replaced or returned, then this is another occasion on which the Ark may have been hauled away from Jerusalem by enemy forces.[32]

3. Temple Reforms: Hezekiah, Manasseh, Josiah

Some scholars hold that, instead of being plundered during attacks by enemy forces, the Ark was destroyed in the process of cultic reforms under one of the following kings of Judah: Hezekiah, Manasseh, or Josiah. Two of these kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, are praised as staunch Yahwists in the biblical text, whereas the other, Manasseh, is consistently condemned for worshiping other gods.

King Hezekiah, who ruled from approximately 715 to 687 BCE, is said to have destroyed numerous cultic objects in the course of his reign:

> הוא הסיר את הבמות ושבר את המצבת וכרת את האשרה וכתת נחש הנחשת אשר עשה משה כי עד הימים ההמה היו בני ישראל מקטרים לו ויקרא לו נחשתן

[32] In the account of Shishak's attack (1 Kgs 14:25–26), Haran argues that the word אצרות should be rendered as "treasuries" rather than "treasures" of the Temple (see n. 28 above). It is more difficult to make such a claim with respect to this account, since the text states that everything made of gold and silver in the house of Yhwh was taken and does not use the word אצרות with regard to the Temple. On the surface, this would seem to include the holy gold vessels of the inner sanctum as well. However, Haran states that, since the looting of the Temple is presented here in parallel to the taking of valuables from the treasuries of the palace, then "the house of Yhwh" should be regarded as a shortened form of "the treasuries of the house of Yhwh" (Haran, "The Disappearance of the Ark," 55n19).

“He removed the high places and destroyed the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He crushed the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for up until those days the Israelites had been sacrificing to it; it was called Nehushtan” (2 Kgs 18:4).

We might deem it unlikely that Hezekiah would have also destroyed the Ark of the Covenant in his purge, since this holy object was supposed to have been directly commissioned by Yhwh. Then again, so was the bronze serpent, which Moses is said to have made in the wilderness (Num 21:8–9). The objects destroyed by Hezekiah appear to have been regarded as sacred to Yhwh at one point in the history of Israel, but were later judged to be idolatrous, and thus not pleasing to Yhwh. It is conceivable that, like Nehushtan, the Israelites had also been treating the physical Ark as a god, or as an object endowed with special powers. As such, Hezekiah may have deemed it idolatrous and fit to be destroyed. This is all speculative, however, since here again, the Ark is not mentioned. Moreover, unlike the accounts of enemy attacks in 1 Kgs 14:25–26 or 2 Kgs 14:14—which state that all the Temple treasures had been taken—in the account of Hezekiah’s reform, only a few specific objects are named as being removed or destroyed.

During his reign, King Hezekiah is said to have rebelled against the current superpower, the Assyrians. His rule overlapped with the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. When King Sennacherib of Assyria attacked Judah, he did not destroy Jerusalem but imposed a heavy tribute of silver and gold on Hezekiah. To meet these demands, Hezekiah took many valuables from the Temple and palace and offered them to Sennacherib:

15 ויתן חזקיה את־כל־הכסף הנמצא בית־יהוה ובאצרות בית המלך: **16** בעת ההיא קצץ חזקיה את־דלתות היכל יהוה ואת־האמנות אשר צפה חזקיה מלך יהודה ויתנם למלך אשור:

"Hezekiah gave all the silver that was found in the house of Yhwh, and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah cut down the doors of Yhwh's palace and the doorposts that Hezekiah King of Judah had overlaid, and he gave them to the king of Assyria" (2 Kgs 18:15–16).

It is possible, then, that the Ark was surrendered to the Assyrians at this time. In the following chapter, however, there may be an implicit reference to the Ark in the Temple, which would suggest it had not been captured. In the midst of an aggressive Assyrian siege, having just received a threatening letter from the Rabshakeh, King Hezekiah is said to have entered the Jerusalem Temple and spread the letter לִפְנֵי יְהוָה, "before Yhwh" (2 Kgs 19:14). This may indicate that the king placed the letter in front of the Ark. (Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, "before Yhwh" at times appears to refer to a position in front of the Ark.[33]) Hezekiah then proceeds to pray "before Yhwh," addressing the deity as יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים "Yhwh God of Israel, who is seated upon the cherubim" (2 Kgs 19:15). A variant of this name, יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים, is attached to the Ark in 1–2 Samuel (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2 = 1 Chron 13:6). Even though many Temple treasures were taken during Hezekiah's reign, this text hints that the Ark and its cherubim might have remained intact throughout the Assyrian siege.[34]

[33] E.g., Josh 6:8; Judges 20:26–27; 2 Sam 6:4–5; 1 Kgs 8:62–65; 2 Kgs 16:4.

[34] The idea that the title יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים here refers to the Ark is supported by numerous scholars, including Tryggve N. D. Mettinger (*The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies*, CB 18 [Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1982], 25) and P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. (*1 Samuel*, AB 8 [New York: Doubleday, 1980], 106–8). Other scholars believe לִפְנֵי יְהוָה should be understood as referring to an enthroned cult statue of the deity (see H. Nier, "In Search of Yahweh's Cult Statue in the First Temple," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, CBET 21 [Leuven: Peeters, 1997], 73–99).

In contrast to his father Hezekiah, King Manasseh is reviled in the Hebrew Bible for his religious conduct. During the course of his long reign (698–642 BCE), Manasseh is said to have undone many of the reforms that his father had enacted; he restored the high places and established altars for Baal, Asherah, and the whole host of heaven in Yhwh's Temple. According to 2 Kgs 21:7, Manasseh also built an image of Asherah and installed it in the Temple.

Some scholars believe that the Ark of Yhwh was removed from the Temple during Manasseh's religious reforms. Menahem Haran, for example, holds that the historical Ark disappeared from Israel under Manasseh and was never replaced thereafter. He reasons that Manasseh was the only king of Judah said to have radically changed the Temple by introducing altars and images of other gods into this space. Moreover, he points out that the position occupied by the Ark in the Temple's Holy of Holies is the place where images of gods were normally located in other temples of the region. Therefore, Haran asserts that Manasseh must have displaced the Ark and cherubim when he installed the image of Asherah in the Temple:

> As already pointed out, Manasseh placed special "vessels made for Baal and Asherah" in the outer sanctum of the Temple. We are therefore entitled to infer that the image of Asherah, which he had introduced into the Temple, was put in the place of the ark and the cherubim. Some fifty years afterwards, when Josiah removed the Asherah from the Temple and burnt it in the Kidron valley, beating it to dust and desecrating even this dust (2 Kings 23:6), the ark and cherubim were no longer there.[35]

Although Haran suggests an interesting possibility, his certainty about this inference should be regarded with suspicion. From the evidence he has presented, we are

[35] Haran, "The Disappearance of the Ark," 51.

hardly "entitled to infer" that Manasseh had done away with the Ark and cherubim when he installed the image of Asherah in the Temple. The biblical text does not tell us where the image of Asherah was placed, but even if it was set up in the Holy of Holies, it is certainly possible that the image of Asherah and the Ark may have shared this holy space. In some periods of Israelite history, it appears that Asherah was regarded as Yhwh's consort and that the two deities may have been worshiped together.[36] Furthermore, there is at least one other example in the Hebrew Bible where two divine images are set up in the same section of a temple: although it was hardly an amicable cohabitation, the Philistines placed the Ark of the Covenant in close proximity to the image of Dagon that was set up in his temple according to 1 Sam 5:1–5. Manasseh is never depicted as having suppressed symbols of Yahwism during his reign, even though this is a charge that might have been leveled against him by the disapproving biblical narrator. Rather, his cultic misdeeds appear to consist of adding on to the cultic symbols in Jerusalem rather than diminishing them. Although the author of the biblical text does not tire of condemning Manasseh's reforms as abhorrent, it is likely that the king himself regarded his cultic acts as acceptable to Yhwh. At no point do we see Manasseh attempting to quash the cult of Yhwh; rather, his reforms appear to be of a syncretistic nature. And of course, as in the other examples we have discussed, the Ark of Yhwh is nowhere mentioned in this text.

Finally, we might consider the possibility that the Ark was destroyed in the seventh century BCE under the pious King Josiah, who also is said to have conducted

[36] For more information regarding the worship of Asherah alongside Yhwh in ancient Israel, see, e.g., John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan*, JSOTSup 265 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God*, trans. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 160–72.

drastic cultic reforms. It was under Josiah that the "book of the law" was purportedly discovered in the Temple (2 Kings 22). Based on the reforms that Josiah undertook in accordance with these laws, scholars have presumed that this document was some form of the book we now call Deuteronomy.[37] After hearing the words of this book, Josiah undertook a sweeping purge of images from the Temple, including the altars of Baal, Asherah, and the host of heaven, as well as the image of Asherah that Manasseh had placed in the Temple, which he burned, ground up, and scattered over graves in the Wadi Kidron (2 Kgs 23:4–6). Again, no mention of the Ark is made here. Inasmuch as Josiah is said to have removed other ornate divine images from the Temple (in addition to those already mentioned, Josiah also destroyed statues of horses and chariots of the sun that had been installed at the entrance of the Temple, 2 Kgs 23:11), it is conceivable that the king would have also purged the Ark and its golden cherubim—if they still existed in the Temple at this time. Although some scholars hold this to be a credible explanation for the loss of the Ark, it is also speculative.[38]

4. Attack of Nebuchadnezzar in 597 BCE

Approximately ten years prior to the complete destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem. When Jehoiachin King of Judah

[37] The identification of Josiah's "book of the law" as Deuteronomy was first proposed in 1805 by W. M. L de Wette. For more on the life and scholarly contributions of de Wette, see J. W. Rogerson, *W. M. L. de Wette, Founder of Modern Biblical Criticism: An Intellectual Biography*, JSOTSup 126 (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

[38] Meir Ish-Shalom (Friedmann) proposed that the Ark was hidden by Josiah because the Israelites had been worshiping it as a god ("Hekhan hu ha-aron?" *Ha-Shiloah* 13 [1904], 541–49, at 545). Moshe Weinfeld calls this "a very probable explanation" ("Jeremiah and the Spiritual Metamorphosis of Israel," *ZAW* 88 [1976]: 17–56, at 23).

surrendered to him, Nebuchadnezzar invaded the city and plundered the Temple and the royal palace.

ויוצא משם את־כל־אוצרות בית יהוה ואוצרות בית המלך ויקצץ את־כל־כלי הזהב אשר עשה שלמה מלך־ישראל בהיכל יהוה כאשר דבר יהוה׃

"He took out from there all the treasures of the house of Yhwh, and the treasures of the king's house. He smashed all the golden things that Solomon King of Israel had made in the palace of Yhwh, just as Yhwh had foretold" (2 Kgs 24:13).

Again, if the Ark was in the Temple at this time, then it is likely to have been among the treasures plundered by the Babylonians already in 597 BCE. If the text is accurate, then the gold cherubim made by Solomon should certainly have been destroyed in this raid. Here the disaster that befell the Temple is presented as if it had occurred at the bidding of Yhwh, who was incensed at Judah because of the sins of Manasseh (2 Kgs 24:2–4).

5. Destruction of the Solomonic Temple in 586 BCE

In 2 Kings 25, we are told that Zedekiah son of Jehoiachin became king of Judah. When he rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian troops invaded Jerusalem and burned it; after thoroughly looting the Temple, they destroyed it. Unlike the previously enumerated accounts of Temple looting, which describe the booty in general terms, the spoils taken from the Temple by the Babylonians are listed here in painstaking detail.

13 ואת־עמודי הנחשת אשר בית־יהוה ואת־המכנות ואת־ים הנחשת אשר בבית־יהוה שברו כשדים וישאו את־
נחשתם בבלה׃ **14** ואת־הסירת ואת־היעים ואת־המזמרות ואת־הכפות ואת כל־כלי הנחשת אשר ישרתו־בם

לקחו: **15** ואת־המחתות ואת־המזרקות אשׁר זהב זהב ואשׁר־כסף כסף לקח רב־טבחים: **16** העמודים שׁנים הים האחד והמכנות אשׁר־עשׂה שׁלמה לבית יהוה לא־היה משׁקל לנחשׁת כל־הכלים האלה: **17** שׁמנה עשׂרה אמה קומת העמוד האחד וכתרת עליו נחשׁת וקומת הכתרת שׁלשׁ אמה [אמות] ושׂבכה ורמנים על־הכתרת סביב הכל נחשׁת וכאלה לעמוד השׁני על־השׂבכה:

> **13** The bronze pillars that were in the house of Yhwh, and the stands, and the bronze sea that were in the house of Yhwh—the Chaldeans destroyed. And they carried off the bronze things to Babylon. **14** The basins and the shovels and the snuffers and the pans, and all the bronze instruments used for Temple service—they took, **15** as well as the censers and the bowls. The chief of the guard took whatever was made of gold for gold, and whatever was silver, for silver. **16** The two pillars, the sea, and the stands that Solomon had made for the house of Yhwh, the bronze of all of these things was beyond weighing. **17** The height of the one pillar was eighteen cubits; on it was a bronze capital, the height of which was three cubits. Latticework and pomegranates, all of bronze, were twined around the capital. Such was also the latticework of the second capital.
>
> (2 Kgs 25:13–17)

As we have already noted, the Ark is conspicuously absent here. This description indicates that the gold, silver, and bronze cultic items were destroyed by the Babylonians and their valuable metals appropriated. If the Ark and its golden cherubim had been in the Temple at the time of the invasion, they likely would have been treated in the same way, i.e., their form collapsed and their gold carried off to Babylon. But as in the other accounts of Temple looting, the Ark is not explicitly mentioned in this text. It is possible that the Ark was plundered at this time (or previously) but that the narrator couldn't bear to recount this event, as the taking of Israel's holiest object would have been too devastating to mention.[39] Alternatively, the reason the Ark is not named may simply be that it was no longer in the Temple, having been plundered or destroyed previously.

[39] But Clifford Mark McCormick makes a strong point against such a view: "This cannot be attributed to the historian's reluctance to narrate something terrible happening to the ark, since there is no such

And yet we should bear in mind that, prior to this catastrophic destruction, the book of Kings recounts three other distinct occasions in which *everything* in the Jerusalem Temple was taken. But unless the treasures of the Temple—including, perhaps, the Ark—had been replaced at some point in between these raids, there would have been nothing left to plunder!

Evidence for the Continued Presence of the Ark throughout the Monarchy

Here again, we may recall the text in Jer 3:16, which implies that the Israelites had been putting too much faith in the Ark of the Covenant and foretells a time when the Ark would never again be revered or replaced. Since Jeremiah is said to have prophesied under the last kings of Judah, it appears that the idea of the powerful Ark—and perhaps the Ark itself—endured throughout the monarchy. Although the Ark of the Covenant is not featured as an active player in Israelite history after the time of King Solomon, it is unlikely that the people would have felt such confidence in (or sorrow over) an object that had been missing for generations.

We have very few biblical texts that affirm the presence of the Ark in the Temple during the Israelite monarchy—that is, in the roughly five centuries between the reign of Solomon and that of Zedekiah. As mentioned above, there may be an allusion to the Ark in the Temple during the time of Hezekiah. One other text in 2 Chronicles affirms the presence of the Ark in the Temple during the reign of Josiah (641–609 BCE). According to 2 Chron 35:3, Josiah commanded the Levites:

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reluctance in I Samuel" (*Palace and Temple: A Study of Architectural and Verbal Icons* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002], 189).

תנו את־ארון־הקדשׁ בבית אשׁר בנה שׁלמה בן־דויד מלך ישׂראל אין־לכם משׂא בכתף

"Take the holy Ark into the house which Solomon son of David King of Israel built; you need not bear it on your shoulders" (2 Chron 35:3).

The historical veracity of this text is dubious, but it does at least reflect a tradition that the Ark was present in Jerusalem under Josiah's rule in the seventh century.

Another important piece of evidence to consider is the statement that appears in 1 Kgs 8:8, immediately after the description of King Solomon's settling of the Ark in the Temple. Here we read:

ויארכו הבדים ויראו ראשׁי הבדים מן־הקדשׁ על־פני הדביר ולא יראו החוצה ויהיו שׁם עד היום הזה׃

"The poles were so long that the tips of the poles were visible from the holy place in front of the inner sanctuary, but they could not be seen from outside. They are still there to this day" (1 Kgs 8:8).

It is likely that this notice was written sometime well after the events it purports to describe; otherwise the fact that the poles are still in place would lack significance or impact. But if we assume the poles and the Ark were actually still in the Temple at the time this text was composed, then we must conclude that it was written prior to the destruction of the Temple that is detailed at the very end of the book of Kings—so sometime in the pre-exilic monarchy. Some scholars, most prominently Frank Moore Cross, have argued that this text dates to the reign of Josiah.[40] We will return to this point

[40] Much of the rest of this chapter, however, was likely composed in the exilic period, as Jon D. Levenson has cogently argued with regard to 1 Kgs 8:23–53 ("From Temple to Synagogue: 1 Kings 8," in *Traditions*

when we discuss various theories for the date and composition of the Deuteronomistic History below.

Other Arks

If one were to set out in search of the physical Ark of the Covenant, then, it is possible that this quest would be entirely in vain. If the Ark was taken from the Temple by the Babylonians or by their attacking predecessors, it is very likely to have been destroyed, its gold melted down and reshaped by enemy forces. The object as such would thus no longer exist.

On the other hand, we could conclude from a reading of Kings that multiple legitimate historical arks might still exist. That is, if the initial ark of the Temple was looted by Shishak, but was replaced thereafter and the replacement ark was later looted by Jehoash, and then its replacement was looted by Nebuchadnezzar, and that ark was replaced prior to the next Babylonian attack in 586 BCE, then there could potentially be at least four legitimate arks still in existence and waiting to be discovered. This is assuming, of course, that the plundered arks were never destroyed by these invading forces.

Some scholars believe that, in the pre-monarchic period, numerous arks were revered in local sanctuaries throughout the land of Israel.[41] The biblical text does not

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in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith, ed. Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levenson [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1981], 143–66).

[41] This thesis is articulated by William R. Arnold: "The historical ark of Yahwe was not a unique but a manifold object, attaching to every Palestinian sanctuary that possessed a consecrated priesthood; and the theory of a single ark, corresponding to that of a single legitimate sanctuary, is the last surviving Deuteronomistic conceit in the theological science of the present day" (William R. Arnold, *Ephod and Ark: A Study in the Records and Religion of the Ancient Hebrews*, HTS 3 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press,

provide any information regarding these other hypothetical arks; we could only assume they would roughly resemble the biblical descriptions of the Ark of Yhwh that we do have. (Otherwise, our ideas regarding them would be purely speculative.) In any case, if there were in fact other historical arks circulating throughout Israel in the pre-monarchic period, then we could add these to the list of possible arks that our ambitious archaeologist might hope to uncover.

It is more likely, however, that an archaeologist might discover an ark from a synagogue built sometime in the Second Temple period or after the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE.[42] In fact, arks of this sort may have already been unearthed. One of the most publicized ark finds occurred in 1981, the same year that the Spielberg film, *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, was released. Archaeologists Carol and Eric Meyers discovered a limestone slab within the remains of a synagogue they were excavating in Nabratein, in northern Israel near the Golan Heights. This slab is

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1917], 26–27). Arnold also includes a helpful discussion of the possibility of multiple arks within rabbinic tradition (see ibid., 24–26).

[42] The historical origins of the synagogue are uncertain. Some scholars hold that the institution of the synagogue was not fully established until after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Others believe the synagogue was part of Jewish life long before this date, pointing to archaeological remains in sites such as Gamla, Masada, and Herodium of what appear to be public meeting spaces dating to the first century CE or earlier. It is not certain that these structures were used for religious purposes, or for Torah reading. However, we also have references to synagogues in literary sources from Josephus and Philo, and the synagogue is mentioned numerous times in the New Testament. For a brief assessment of the scholarly debate on the issue, see Joseph Gutmann, "Ancient Synagogues: Archaeological Fact and Scholarly Assumption," *BAI* 9 (1995): 226–27. A fuller treatment of the issues is given by Lester L. Grabbe, "Synagogues in Pre-70 Palestine: A Re-Assessment," *JTS* 39 (1988): 401–10. More recently, the 2009 discovery of a decorated stone in what is believed to be a synagogue at Magdala has attracted much scholarly attention. The designs on the stone appear to depict Jewish symbols, and many scholars believe the engravings on its sides and top were intended to depict the Temple itself, even the Holy of Holies. A coin discovered near the stone has been dated to 29 CE. For discussions and renderings of the designs on the Magdala Stone, see Isabel Kershner, "A Carved Stone Block Upends Assumptions about Ancient Judaism," *New York Times*, December 8, 2015; Mordechai Aviam, "A Decorated Stone from the Synagogue at Migdal: A Holistic Interpretation and a Glimpse into the Life of Galilean Jews at the Time of Jesus," *NovT* 55 (2013): 205–20; Richard Bauckham, "Further Thoughts on the Migdal Synagogue Stone," *NovT* 57 (2015): 113–35.

carved with ornamentation of two lions flanking a roof; it dates to sometime between 250 and 306 CE, when an earthquake caused destruction in the area. Despite the sensational title of the article describing the find in *People Magazine* that year ("Eric and Carol Meyers Didn't Dig the Ark in *Raiders*—They Found the Real Thing"[43]), this artifact can hardly be designated *the* Ark of the Covenant. It is not thought to be the Ark that existed in the Solomonic Temple. Rather, it is believed to be the cover of a Torah ark, or an *'aron qodesh*, a chest used to contain Torah scrolls in synagogues.[44]

Biblical Forms of the Ark

At this point, we must raise an important question: how would it be possible to verify that any unearthed object is in fact *the* Ark, or one of possibly multiple arks that were housed in the Jerusalem Temple? If we claim that the object corresponds to the description of the Ark given in the Hebrew Bible, we then must ask: which description? There are at least two—possibly three—different and apparently contradictory descriptions of the Ark's physical form in the Hebrew Bible, which we will outline here.

1. Exodus 25:10–22; 37:1–9

By far the most detailed physical description of the Ark of the Covenant appears in Priestly literature. In Exodus 25, Yhwh appears to Moses on Mount Sinai and gives him precise instructions for building the Tabernacle in order to house the divine presence in

[43] See the article describing the find in *People* magazine by Victoria Everett, "Eric and Carol Meyers Didn't Dig the Ark in *Raiders*—They Found the Real Thing," *People* 16, no. 11 (September 14, 1981): 57–61. Online: http://www.people.com/people/archive/article/0,,20080206,00.html.

[44] Like synagogues, the history of the *'aron qodesh* is also uncertain. For an overview, see Rachel Wischnitzer and Bezalel Narkiss, "Ark," *EncJud* 2:463–64.

the Israelite camp. Included within these instructions is an elaborate blueprint for crafting an ark, the centerpiece of cultic furniture. Yhwh specifies the material that should be used to build the Ark, as well as its dimensions. Special attention is given to the Ark's solid gold cover, from which two cherubim were to be constructed. It is worth quoting the passage here in full:

10 ועשׂו ארון עצי שׁטים אמתים וחצי ארכו ואמה וחצי רחבו ואמה וחצי קמתו: **11** וצפית אתו זהב טהור
מבית ומחוץ תצפנו ועשׂית עליו זר זהב סביב: **12** ויצקת לו ארבע טבעת זהב ונתתה על ארבע פעמתיו ושׁתי
טבעת על־צלעו האחת ושׁתי טבעת על־צלעו השׁנית: **13** ועשׂית בדי עצי שׁטים וצפית אתם זהב: **14** והבאת
את־הבדים בטבעת על צלעת הארן לשׂאת את־הארן בהם: **15** בטבעת הארן יהיו הבדים לא יסרו ממנו: **16**
ונתת אל־הארן את העדת אשׁר אתן אליך: **17** ועשׂית כפרת זהב טהור אמתים וחצי ארכה ואמה וחצי רחבה:
18 ועשׂית שׁנים כרבים זהב מקשׁה תעשׂה אתם משׁני קצות הכפרת: **19** ועשׂה כרוב אחד מקצה מזה וכרוב־
אחד מקצה מזה מן־הכפרת תעשׂו את־הכרבים על־שׁני קצותיו: **20** והיו הכרבים פרשׂי כנפים למעלה סככים
בכנפיהם על־הכפרת ופניהם איש אל־אחיו אל־הכפרת יהיו פני הכרבים: **21** ונתת את־הכפרת על־הארן
מלמעלה ואל־הארן תתן את־העדת אשׁר אתן אליך: **22** ונועדתי לך שׁם ודברתי אתך מעל הכפרת מבין שׁני
הכרבים אשׁר על־ארן העדת את כל־אשׁר אצוה אותך אל־בני ישׂראל:

> **10** An Ark of acacia wood shall be made. Its length shall be two and a half cubits; its width, a cubit and a half; and its height, a cubit and a half. **11** You shall overlay it with pure gold—overlay it inside and out—and make a border of gold upon it all around. **12** Cast for it four gold rings, which you shall place upon each of its four feet: two rings on its one side, and two rings on its other side. **13** Make two poles of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. **14** You shall insert the poles through the rings on the side of the Ark so that the Ark can be carried by them. **15** In the rings of the Ark the poles shall remain; they shall not be removed from it. **16** You shall place into the Ark the covenant[45] that I will give to you. **17** You shall make a cover of pure gold: its length shall be two and a half cubits; its width, one

[45] The term I am translating as "covenant" here and in v. 21 is עדת. Recently, some scholars have argued that the term עדת in P should not be understood as a "covenant," or at least that its meaning is not the same as that of ברית (the most common term for "covenant" in non-Priestly texts). See, e.g., Baruch Schwartz, "The Priestly Account of the Theophany and Lawgiving at Sinai," in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran*, ed. Michael V. Fox, et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 103–34. Schwartz states that the עדת in P is "a relic of the private theophany," "the nature and contents of which cannot even be guessed" (ibid., 127). Given the lack of scholarly consensus on the meaning of עדת and how it should be translated, I continue to render the word with the familiar term "covenant."

and a half cubits.[46] **18** You shall make two gold cherubim: make them of hammered work from the two ends of the cover. **19** Make one cherub out of the one end, and one cherub out of the other. From the cover you shall make the cherubim, upon its two ends. **20** The cherubim should be stretching out their two wings upward, overshadowing the cover with their wings, with their faces turned toward each other—the faces of the cherubim shall be over the cover. **21** You shall place the cover on top of the Ark, and into the Ark you shall put the covenant that I will give to you. **22** I will meet you there, and I will speak with you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubim that are over the Ark of the Covenant—everything that I command you concerning the people of Israel.

2. Deuteronomy 10:1–5

We find a very different description of this object in Deuteronomy. Almost as an afterthought, God instructs Moses to build an ark of wood in which to place the tablets of the covenant. So Moses builds an ark in accordance with the divine command.

[1]בעת ההוא אמר יהוה אלי פסל־לך שני־לוחת אבנים כראשנים ועלה אלי ההרה ועשית לך ארון עץ: **2**
ואכתב על־הלחת את־הדברים אשר היו על־הלחת הראשנים אשר שברת ושמתם בארון: **3** ואעש ארון עצי
שטים ואפסל שני־לחת אבנים כראשנים ואעל ההרה ושני הלחת בידי: **4** ויכתב על־הלחת כמכתב הראשון את
עשרת הדברים אשר דבר יהוה אליכם בהר מתוך האש ביום הקהל ויתנם יהוה אלי: **5** ואפן וארד מן־ההר
ואשם את־הלחת בארון אשר עשיתי ויהיו שם כאשר צוני יהוה:

1 At that time, Yhwh said to me: "Hew out two stone tablets like the first ones and come up to me on the mountain—and make an ark of wood. **2** I will write upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets which you smashed, and you shall put them in the Ark." **3** So I made an ark of acacia wood, and I hewed out two stone tablets like the first ones, and I went up the mountain with the two tablets in my hands. **4** He wrote upon the tablets exactly what had been written previously—the ten utterances which Yhwh had spoken to you on the mountain from the midst of the fire on the day of assembly, and Yhwh gave them to me. **5** I turned and went down from the mountain, and I put the tablets in the Ark which I had made, and they remained there, just as Yhwh had commanded me.

[46] That is: 4 feet, 2 inches by 30 inches (C. L. Seow, "Ark of the Covenant," *ABD* 1:386–93, at 392).

3. 1 Kings 6 and 8

When the Ark is placed in the Temple built for Yhwh by David's son, King Solomon, the exact form of this Ark is not specified. However, we are told that Solomon builds cherubim and places them in the innermost sanctuary to provide a shelter of sorts for the Ark, which he then places under their outstretched wings. The form and measurements of these cherubim are given in detail in 1 Kings 6:

23 ויעשׂ בדביר שׁני כרובים עצי־שׁמן עשׂר אמות קומתו׃ **24** וחמשׁ אמות כנף הכרוב האחת וחמשׁ אמות כנף
הכרוב השׁנית עשׂר אמות מקצות כנפיו ועד־קצות כנפיו׃ **25** ועשׂר באמה הכרוב השׁני מדה אחת וקצב אחד
לשׁני הכרבים׃ **26** קומת הכרוב האחד עשׂר באמה וכן הכרוב השׁני׃ **27** ויתן את־הכרובים בתוך הבית הפנימי
ויפרשׂו את־כנפי הכרבים ותגע כנף־האחד בקיר וכנף הכרוב השׁני נגעת בקיר השׁני וכנפיהם אל־תוך הבית
נגעת כנף אל־כנף׃ **28** ויצף את־הכרובים זהב׃

> **23** In the inner sanctuary he made two cherubim of olivewood, ten cubits high.
> **24** The wing of the one cherub was five cubits, and the wing of the second cherub was five cubits—ten cubits from one end of its wings to the other end of its wings. **25** The second cherub was also ten cubits. Both cherubim had the same measure and form. **26** The height of the one cherub was ten cubits, and so too for the second cherub. **27** He put the cherubim in the innermost part of the house; the wings of the cherubim were spread out so that the wing of the one touched the wall, and the wing of the second cherub was touching the other wall, and their inner wings were touching wing to wing. **28** He overlaid the cherubim with gold. (1 Kgs 6:23–28)

When Solomon finishes building the Temple of Yhwh, the Ark of the Covenant is then ceremoniously settled under the wings of the huge cherubim waiting in the inner sanctuary.

אז יקהל שׁלמה את־זקני ישׂראל את־כל־ראשׁי המטות נשׂיאי האבות לבני ישׂראל אל־המלך שׁלמה ירושׁלם
להעלות את־ארון ברית־יהוה מעיר דוד היא ציון׃ **2** ויקהלו אל־המלך שׁלמה כל־איש ישׂראל בירח האתנים
בחג הוא החדשׁ השׁביעי׃ **3** ויבאו כל זקני ישׂראל וישׂאו הכהנים את־הארון׃ **4** ויעלו את־ארון יהוה ואת־אהל
מועד ואת־כל־כלי הקדשׁ אשׁר באהל ויעלו אתם הכהנים והלוים׃ **5** והמלך שׁלמה וכל־עדת ישׂראל הנועדים

עליו אתו לפני הארון מזבחים צאן ובקר אשׁר לא־יספרו ולא ימנו מרב: 6 ויבאו הכהנים את־ארון ברית־יהוה
אל־מקומו אל־דביר הבית אל־קדשׁ הקדשׁים אל־תחת כנפי הכרובים: 7 כי הכרובים פרשׂים כנפים אל־מקום
הארון ויסכו הכרבים על־הארון ועל־בדיו מלמעלה: 8 ויארכו הבדים ויראו ראשׁי הבדים מן־הקדשׁ על־פני
הדביר ולא יראו החוצה ויהיו שׁם עד היום הזה: 9 אין בארון רק שׁני לחות האבנים אשׁר הנח שׁם משׁה בחרב
אשׁר כרת יהוה עם־בני ישׂראל בצאתם מארץ מצרים:

> [1] Then Solomon gathered the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites to King Solomon in Jerusalem in order to bring up the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh from the city of David—that is, Zion. [2] Everyone in Israel gathered to King Solomon at the festival in the month of Ethanim, which is the seventh month. [3] All the elders of Israel came, and the priests carried the Ark. [4] They brought up the Ark of Yhwh, and the tent of meeting, and all the holy objects that were in the tent; the priests and the Levites brought them up. [5] King Solomon and the entire congregation of Israel that had assembled to him were with him before the Ark, sacrificing sheep and cattle in such abundance that they could not be counted or numbered. [6] Then the priests brought the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh to its place, to the inner sanctuary of the house, to the Holy of Holies, beneath the wings of the cherubim. [7] For the cherubim were stretching out their wings towards the place of the Ark; the cherubim overshadowed the Ark and its poles. [8] The poles extended and the ends of the poles could be seen from the holy place in front of the inner sanctuary, but could not be seen from outside. They are there to this day. [9] Nothing was in the Ark except for the two stone tablets that Moses had put there at Horeb, where Yhwh had made a covenant with the Israelites when they came out from the land of Egypt. (1 Kgs 8:1–9)

Contradictory Forms?

Clearly, these accounts are very different. But do these texts describe forms of the Ark that are necessarily contradictory? Let's begin by considering the form of the cherubim that overshadow the Ark. Exodus 25 and 1 Kings 8 obviously describe two distinct pairs of cherubim, as they are said to have been built by two different people at two different times. According to Exodus 25, Yhwh tells Moses on Mount Sinai that cherubim should be crafted from the Ark's solid gold cover, and then the craftsman Bezalel makes the cherubim according to these instructions (Exod 37:6–9). The cherubim described in 1 Kings 8, on the other hand, are reported to have been constructed much later, centuries

after the time of Moses (after the Israelites had wandered through the desert for forty years, had taken over the land of Canaan, and at last established a monarchy there).

Aside from being constructed at different times and by different people, the form of these creatures is also different. Whereas the cherubim in Exodus are of one piece with the Ark's solid gold cover, the cherubim built by Solomon are much larger, free-standing creatures made of olivewood and overlaid with gold. The two sets of cherubim thus differ in size and substance, and in their physical relation to the Ark. The cherubim attached to the Ark in Exodus are portable figures, whereas the cherubim in the book of Kings are part of the Temple architecture. At ten cubits high and ten cubits wide (that is, about fifteen feet by fifteen feet), these figures would have been very challenging to transport.

But do these two different descriptions of the cherubim entail a logical contradiction? Or, to pose the question somewhat differently: What was the form of the Ark that Solomon ushered into the Temple? We are told that the Ark of 1 Kings 8 has poles, which corresponds to the description of the Ark given in Exodus 25. But can we therefore assume that the Ark of Solomon's Temple matched the Exodus description in other respects? What were the dimensions of this Ark, for instance, and did the Ark installed in Solomon's Temple also have a solid gold cover overshadowed by the wings of two cherubim with faces turned towards each other? If so, this would mean that the Ark of the Temple would have been doubly flanked by cherubim—the two gold ones attached to its cover, and the two larger cherubim towering overhead.[47]

[47] Haran calls such a configuration "unthinkable" and concludes that the Ark placed under the cherubim in Solomon's Temple must therefore correspond to the description of its form in Deuteronomy 10 (Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985], 249).

A more likely scenario is that these two accounts of gold cherubim covering the Ark represent two separate literary traditions regarding the Ark and its attendant cherubim. If this were the case, then it may be ill-advised to attempt to combine the two accounts. Instead, these cherubim should be relegated to separate "scenes," so to speak, and not brought together as co-stars on the same narrative set.

Likewise, two different views on the form of the Ark are represented in Exodus and Deuteronomy—the former very ornate, and the latter remarkably plain. Although here too it would be possible to harmonize the two accounts, to do so would be quite a stretch. We might suppose that the Ark built by Moses in Deuteronomy looked the same as the one constructed in Exodus. After all, both are boxes made of acacia wood. It is possible (though unlikely) that the narrator in Deuteronomy simply left out all the other details (that it should be covered in gold, topped with a gold cover and cherubim, etc.). If we wish to imagine that these two accounts describe the same form, however, then that conflated form must correspond to the more detailed account given in Exodus.

But if we do not wish to posit that these two very different descriptions refer to the same object, there may still be a way to claim that the two accounts do not logically contradict each other. That is, the two texts could accurately describe two different arks that were both regarded as *the* Ark at a certain point in Israelite history. We might suppose, for instance, that the description in Exodus 25 corresponds to the form of the original Ark that was placed in the Temple during the time of Solomon. We have discussed the possibility that the original Ark may have been plundered by Shishak or Jehoash and then replaced. The rebuilt Ark may not have been identical in form to the

plundered Ark. Perhaps the first ornate Ark was replaced by a simple wooden box, and this was the Ark that occupied the Temple during the time that Deuteronomy 10 was composed.

In sum, then, one might claim: Yes, there are two incompatible ark forms described in these two biblical texts, Exodus 25 and Deuteronomy 10. But both may be historically valid if they describe two distinct Arks that played the role of *the* Ark in the Jerusalem Temple at two different points in Israelite history. One who holds this opinion might concede that Deuteronomy's description of the Ark constructed by Moses on Mount Horeb represents a mythologizing of the "updated" form of the Ark. In this case, the story presented in Deuteronomy would be a revision intended to show that the current simplified version of the Ark, the plain wooden box, is what Yhwh had in mind when he commanded Moses to construct a container for the tablets of the law.

Medieval Jewish scholars proposed two different ways of understanding the apparently contradictory biblical accounts of the Ark's origins. One explanation is that the Israelites took two different arks away from Mount Sinai: a simpler version made by Moses, in which the two broken tablets of the law were placed; as well as the more ornate Ark made by Bezalel, which contained the newer, unbroken tablets of the law. The gilded Ark of Bezalel remained in the sanctuary, whereas the wooden Ark of Moses moved about with the Israelites in the wilderness and on the battlefield. The second explanation is that Moses built a simple wooden ark on the mountain as a preliminary container for the tablets of the law, but as soon as Bezalel finished constructing the more elaborate

version with gold and cherubim, the older wooden box was discarded and replaced by the work of art crafted by Bezalel.[48]

So, to return to our hypothetical scenario: Which ark should our treasure hunter hope to find? It would not be very exciting to discover a simple wooden box as described in Deuteronomy. Fortunately for our imaginary thrill-seeking archaeologist, this would be implausible in any case, since wood tends to deteriorate rather quickly over time.[49] Thus, if the Ark of the Temple were the simple wooden box described in Deuteronomy 10, it is highly unlikely still to exist, based on its material alone. If this Ark of acacia wood were somehow preserved, however, how might we then identify a wooden box as the Ark of the Covenant without knowing the dimensions of the Ark or other details regarding its appearance from Deuteronomy 10? Unless it also still has the stone tablets of the covenant tucked inside, there would hardly be a way of determining whether any excavated wooden box might correspond to the Ark as described in Deuteronomy.

Ruling out the simple wooden box as a potential candidate for the definitively discovered Ark, we might permit our hypothetical archaeologist to search for a more interesting object. If he were to find an object that could be judged to correspond to a biblical description of the Ark, then, it would have to be the ornate gold object as detailed in Exodus (since apart from the brief note in Deuteronomy 10, we do not have any other detailed description of the Ark's form in 1 Kings or elsewhere). But here again, we might ask: How many cherubim should he expect to find in proximity to the discovered Ark? If

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[48] Abravanel, *l. c*., fol. 85 f. As summarized by Arnold, *Ephod and Ark*, 26.

[49] For more on the preservation of ancient wood in the Mediterranean region, see Russell Meiggs, *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

he seeks the object that was placed in the Solomonic Temple, then presumably he would not find the larger cherubim, as we would imagine they'd have been destroyed along with the rest of the Temple architecture in 586 BCE. Would the discovered Ark have cherubim attached to it, then, or not? If we imagine a harmonizing of the two traditions in Exodus and Kings, in which the Ark placed in the Temple was doubly flanked by cherubim, then the discovered Ark would include cherubim. But if these biblical accounts reflect two different traditions regarding cherubim in relation to the Ark, then perhaps the Ark placed in the Temple had no cherubim attached to it. The form of the Ark of 1 Kings 8 may correspond to the simple wooden Ark described in Deuteronomy 10, or perhaps its form would not have matched either biblical description of the Ark.

Forms of the Ark in the So-Called Deuteronomistic History

Thus far, I have been deliberately avoiding using source critical tools to speak of these biblical accounts of the Ark and their relation to each other. This is because I wanted to survey the textual evidence on its own first, considering possible relationships between texts that describe the form of the Ark before imposing upon them any system of relative dating or influence.

If we want to discuss these texts in light of source criticism, it should first be pointed out that most of the literature in which the Ark of Yhwh is featured as a protagonist belongs to a group of biblical books commonly known as the "Deuteronomistic History," which is comprised of Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings. The concept of a Deuteronomistic History came into scholarly vogue following the work of Martin Noth. As others had noted before him, Noth observed that the story

told in Joshua to Kings appears to have been heavily influenced by the worldview articulated in the book of Deuteronomy.[50] In *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (1943), Noth articulated his theory that the biblical books from Deuteronomy to Kings represent a carefully planned history that was written and compiled by a single author with specific theological concerns.[51] Noth dated this work, the Deuteronomistic History (abbreviated Dtr), to just after the last event it purports to describe, the release of King Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon—so around 560 BCE (2 Kgs 25:27–30).

Frank Moore Cross accepted much of Noth's view but refined his theory significantly by proposing a double redaction of the Deuteronomistic History.[52] According to Cross, there was a pre-exilic edition of Dtr that can be dated to the seventh-century reign of Josiah, in addition to the exilic edition identified by Noth. Cross's formulation takes into account texts such as the one mentioned previously, 1 Kgs 8:8, which states that the Ark and its poles remain in place "until this day" (see also a similar remark in 1 Kgs 9:21). This statement seems to have been written at a time prior to 560 BCE, during the monarchy, when the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing. The double-redaction theory of Cross also better accounts for the optimistic strains in Dtr: the everlasting promise to the Davidic dynasty in 2 Samuel 7, for example. Noth's

[50] Themes that are emphasized in Deuteronomy and continued in the historical narratives of Joshua–Kings include the following: cult centralization, holy war (Yhwh fighting on Israel's behalf), strict monotheism (and rhetoric against idolatry), the importance of keeping the law, covenant, and election of Israel. In his *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), Moshe Weinfeld includes an appendix listing major shared themes and terminology in Deuteronomy, Dtr, and prophetic literature, especially Jeremiah (see his Appendix A, pp. 320–65).

[51] For an English translation of the first part of *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*, see Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 2nd ed., JSOTSup 182 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

[52] Cross outlines his double-redaction theory in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 274–89.

reconstruction of Dtr's composition history, by contrast, leaves little room for any hopeful ideology. According to Noth, the primary point of the Deuteronomistic History is to explain how Israel's sins led to their current divine punishment in the form of the Babylonian exile.

Many scholars have criticized Noth's view of a unified history as too simplistic. The Göttingen school, following Smend, has pointed out that many conflicting perspectives are represented in this large body of literature, and that the corpus reflects a highly complicated process of redaction. As opposed to Cross's double-redaction model, the Göttingen school has postulated at least three distinct redactional layers in Joshua–Kings.[53] Regardless of how many layers are detected, however, it is generally acknowledged that common themes run through these texts, and so the name "Deuteronomistic History" has been maintained in scholarly discourse.

If we accept the conclusions of the traditional Documentary Hypothesis, then it is highly unlikely that the form of the Ark presented in Samuel or Kings would be *based on* (or would presuppose) the description of the Ark in Exodus 25. This is because Exodus 25 is a Priestly text (P), and this source is traditionally dated to the late exilic or post-exilic period—that is, to a time after the redaction of the so-called Deuteronomistic History was generally thought to have been finalized.[54]

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[53] A helpful summary of the development of theories regarding the Deuteronomistic History may be found in Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical, and Literary Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

[54] Some of Julius Wellhausen's reasons for proposing a late date for P have been discredited. He operated according to an evolutionary model stipulating that earlier forms of religious life were more spontaneous and emotional, whereas later manifestations of the original religious impulse were marked by stricter rules that regulated religious experience. For Wellhausen, then, P—with its concern for order, cultic details, and legal stipulations—represented a later period in Yahwistic religion, whereas the charismatic perspective and personalities of JE indicate that this literature should be dated earlier. Wellhausen's view has been

In fact, many influential scholars have argued that the details of the tabernacle construction outlined in Priestly texts (Exodus 25–31 and 35–40) are actually based on the description of Solomon's Temple in 1 Kings, or on the actual form of the Second Temple.[55] One of the earliest and most prominent proponents of this view is Julius Wellhausen, the best-known expositor of the Documentary Hypothesis in its classical form,[56] who called the Priestly description of the tabernacle a "pious fraud."[57] Frank Moore Cross summarizes the contribution of Wellhausen as follows: "It was Wellhausen's conclusion, however, that the Priestly Tabernacle (*mishkan*) was demonstrably the fancy of the post-exilic Priestly writers; or more precisely, a description of the Temple in flimsy desert disguise."[58] Wellhausen and his followers believe that no

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criticized as being both inaccurate from a history of religions perspective and based on an anti-Semitic bias that viewed the religion of the Jews as stiffly legalistic, as opposed to the charismatic spirit of love supposedly advocated by Christianity. Some points made by Wellhausen in support of this dating scheme, however, are still considered valid. For example, Wellhausen observed that the pre-exilic prophets demonstrate no knowledge of the regulations articulated in P. His relative dating of the four major literary sources of the Pentateuch, with P as the latest source, is still a mainstream scholarly view among those who accept the basic tenets of the Documentary Hypothesis (Baruch Schwartz, "The Priestly Account of the Theophany and Lawgiving at Sinai," 109–10). See Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1883).

[55] For a discussion of the formal similarities between Solomon's temple and the tabernacle, see Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, 189–94.

[56] "Wellhausen elaborated a formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis, which was soon to become somewhat of a 'canonical model' for critical scholarship. Wellhausen isolated two ancient narrative sources, 'J' (the Yahwist) and 'E' (the Elohist). These documents, from the first centuries of Israelite monarchy, were then combined by the 'Jehowist' (JE) into a single work. Wellhausen located the source 'D' (the original book of Deuteronomy) in the seventh century BCE, at the time of Josiah, and 'P' (the Priestly source) at the end of or after the Babylonian exile" (Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History*, 19).

[57] *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, 39–40.

[58] Frank Moore Cross, Jr., "The Tabernacle: A Study from an Archaeological and Historical Approach," *BA* 10 (1947): 45–68, at 47.

tabernacle actually existed in the wilderness era. Rather, the exilic authors of P invented the idea of a tabernacle in the wilderness, modeling its details on those of the Temple.[59]

Scholars have written at length on the ideological motivations of the exilic or post-exilic Priestly authors who described the wilderness tabernacle in such great detail. For example, it has been suggested that the Priestly authors may have wished to extend the antiquity of the sanctuary model in order to show that it was not tied exclusively to the rise of the monarchy in Israel. Doing so might demonstrate that the presence of God among the Israelites is not dependent on a temple or a king, or even a foothold in the land. Thus, the Israelites in exile who had no temple, king, or country would be encouraged in their faith and would imagine that God's presence might still be accessible to them. In the words of Jon D. Levenson, "the availability of God in His portable home probably did serve as a source of consolation to an Israel in exile (sixth century BCE) far from their temple, which lay in ruins. To them the most meaningful image of God was not that of a king enthroned in his massive stone palace; it was that of a delicate tabernacling presence, on the move with his people."[60]

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[59] Wellhausen's theory of a fictitious tabernacle is based, roughly, on three things: 1) the logistical implausibility of transporting such a large mobile sanctuary through the desert. Recently, however, scholars have argued in favor of the historicity of the tabernacle, citing Egyptian and ancient Near Eastern parallels. See, e.g., Daniel Fleming's analysis of large Late Bronze Age tent sanctuaries at Mari ("Mari's Large Public Tent and the Priestly Tent Sanctuary," *VT* 50 [2000]: 484–98); 2) the supposed late (exilic or post-exilic) dating of P (see n 31 above); 3) the similarity of the dimensions of the tabernacle to that of the temple, suggesting that one tradition was based on the other (see n 32 above). And if P is the later tradition, then scholars assume the tabernacle described in P must have been based on the temple dimensions. Moreover, if P is later (exilic), it is thought to be dubious that such a late text could preserve authentic memories or traditions of an actual wilderness tabernacle.

[60] Jon D. Levenson, "The Jerusalem Temple in Devotional and Visionary Experience," in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 32–61, at 33.

If the Priestly tabernacle were a late fiction, post-dating Dtr, what would it imply for the form(s) of the Ark as presented in Dtr (Joshua, Samuel, and Kings)? We would have to conclude that the Deuteronomistic Ark could not be *based* on the form described in Exodus 25, but we could still suppose that it might have *corresponded to* the form described there. Of course there would be no way of knowing this for sure, but it is possible that the Priestly account of Exodus 25 reflects a tradition of the Ark's form that was shared by the authors of the Deuteronomistic History. In any case, we would have to concede that we simply do not know much about the form of the Ark in Joshua, Samuel, and Kings, since so few details are provided in the texts themselves.

In the previous paragraph, I referred to "the Deuteronomistic Ark." But it appears that there is no single concept of the Ark consistently represented in the books of Joshua through Kings. Let's return to our original heuristic and ask once again about the form of the Ark that was placed beneath the wings of the cherubim in Solomon's Temple according to 1 Kings 8.

Since Kings is part of the Deuteronomistic History, a body of literature that appears to have been heavily influenced by the theological worldview articulated in Deuteronomy, then perhaps we should imagine that the Ark placed in the Temple by Solomon in 1 Kings 8 corresponds to the description of the Ark as presented in Deuteronomy 10. That is, the Ark of the Temple may have been the simple box of acacia wood built by Moses, which presumably had no cherubim connected to it. For those

scholars who posit a single form of the Ark within Dtr, this is the option that seems most plausible.[61]

Elsewhere in the Deuteronomistic History, however, there is a clear association between the Ark and cherubim, even in accounts that are set at a time prior to the building of the Temple. This is attested, for example, in the name for the Ark that appears in 1–2 Samuel, "the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh of Hosts, who is seated upon the cherubim" (ארון ברית יהוה צבאות ישב הכרבים). It is possible that this title is anachronistic and actually refers to the huge cherubim that Solomon would later construct to shelter the Ark in the Temple. It is also possible that this name is meant to extol the might of Yhwh by associating him with mythical cherubim, but that it tells us nothing about the form of the Ark in this setting.[62] Aside from these possibilities, it does seem likely that an ark named after cherubim would have physical cherubim attached to it, especially considering that other biblical accounts attest to the Ark being accompanied by figures of cherubim. If so, what would such an ark have looked like? If we had to choose between our two biblical descriptions of the Ark's form (Exodus 25 or Deuteronomy 10), then it would appear that the Ark of Samuel is more likely to resemble the description provided in Exodus, since that option includes cherubim. This is the only physical detailing of the Ark that pictures it with mobile versions of cherubim—the ones that are formed out of its solid gold cover.

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[61] This view is supported by McCormick, who states: "It must be recalled that the ark in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic literature is a simple wood box that contains the tablets of the covenant, i.e., the Decalogue. Therefore, the ark that Dtr places as the central furnishing of Solomon's temple is not the elaborate implement envisioned by the Priestly writer" (McCormick, *Palace and Temple*, 172–73).

[62] So Haran: "To be sure, in the two passages I Sam. 4:4 and 2 Sam. 6:2 Yahweh is spoken of as one 'who sits upon the cherubim.' However, this attribute does not relate to the ark mentioned in those passages—it refers only to Yahweh and describes his nature" (*Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel*, 249).

Within a traditional Wellhausian view, P post-dates Dtr, and thus the authors of texts called Deuteronomistic should not have been aware of the description of the Ark in Priestly texts.[63] In more recent scholarship, however, it has been noted that some narratives of the Deuteronomistic History appear to refer to events recounted in Priestly literature. Thomas Römer points out allusions to the Priestly account of the Egyptian exodus and plagues in the Ark Narrative (e.g., 1 Sam 5:12 seems to echo Exod 2:23), which might be taken to suggest that this portion of the story post-dates P.[64] Other scholars have mounted arguments in defense of an early, pre-exilic dating for P.[65] Avi Hurvitz, for example, claims an early date for P on linguistic grounds, arguing that P's vocabulary and syntax show no features of Late Biblical Hebrew, as would be expected if P were post-exilic.[66] In light of this conflicting evidence, it is difficult to postulate any clear-cut relationship concerning the relative dating of P and Dtr.[67]

Even if we could somehow show that Exodus 25 predates the Ark Narrative, however, this would not prove literary dependence. The cherubim associated with the Ark in 1–2 Samuel still might not match the form of the cherubim connected to the Ark's

[63] Moshe Weinfeld points out one significant weakness of Wellhausen's view: "Had P been dependent on D—as Wellhausen assumed—then we should be able to discern this dependence in verbal and conceptual parallels, but no such dependence has yet been convincingly demonstrated" (*Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 180).

[64] Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History*, 144.

[65] A summary of scholarly arguments for an early dating of P, following Kaufmann's observations (Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toledot Ha-Emunah Ha-Yisraelit*, 4 vols. [Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Bialik and Devir, 1937–56]) may be found in Moshe Weinfeld, *The Place of the Law in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

[66] Avi Hurvitz, "Dating the Priestly Source in Light of the Historical Study of Biblical Hebrew a Century after Wellhausen," *ZAW* 100 (1988): 88–100.

[67] Given the challenges of dating P and Dtr against each other, Moshe Weinfeld has proposed that we "regard the literary compositions of these schools as concurrent rather than successive documents" stemming from different sociological contexts (*Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 180).

cover in Exodus 25. It is also important to note that we do not know what generic cherubim would have looked like.[68] In all biblical accounts that describe their form, however, they have wings and faces—and the cherubim associated with the Ark in Exodus 25 and 1 Kings 8 come in pairs and are carved out of or overlaid with gold. Perhaps it would be safe to assume, then, that the Ark whose title contained the phrase יֹשֵׁב הכרבים in Samuel was adorned with a single pair of winged gold cherubim. Still, unless we can prove that the Ark Narrative of 1–2 Samuel presupposes Exodus 25, we must remain agnostic with regard to the exact form of these cherubim, including their configuration, dimensions, substance, and features.

The Form of the Ark in Light of יֹשֵׁב הכרבים

In his article, "The Meaning of יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים,"[69] Raanan Eichler makes the following claim: "the interpretation of יֹשֵׁב הכרבים as 'who is seated upon the cherubim' is grammatically unjustified; it must be rejected, and all theories based on it should be reevaluated."[70] Eichler provides a thorough and helpful translation history of יֹשֵׁב הכרבים. He discusses six historical interpretations of this phrase, from the Septuagint to modern scholarship. Presenting these as our only interpretive options, he proceeds to dismiss all but one of

[68] Raanan Eichler has recently discussed the form of the biblical cherubim in his article, "Cherub: A History of Interpretation," *Biblica* 96 (2015): 26–38. Eichler has also recently published a popular version of this article (with some nice images) on TheTorah.com under the title, "What Kind of Creatures Are the Cherubim?" (2016): http://thetorah.com/what-kind-of-creatures-are-the-cherubim/. Eichler presents an interesting overview regarding the way cherubim have been imagined in numerous contexts. Menahem Haran also discusses the form of cherubim and concludes that, "in the world of the Old Testament the cherubim's image was not fixed in every detail, but was subject, within certain limits, to variation" (Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 259).

[69] Raanan Eichler, "The Meaning of יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים," *ZAW* 126 (2014): 358–71.

[70] Ibid., 370.

them through grammatical reasoning. Eichler holds up the remaining interpretation as the correct one, concluding that יֹשֵׁב הכרבים should be rendered "who dwells among the cherubim," with cherubim understood as the living creatures that inhabit the "Edenic realm." As I have translated יֹשֵׁב הכרבים above in precisely the way Eichler rejects, it may be correctly assumed that I disagree with his assessment. I will outline his argument and explain my objections to it in what follows.

Eichler observes that we encounter two main problems when attempting to interpret יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים. First, the absence of a preposition makes the relationship between the two nouns unclear. Second, each of these nouns may be understood in several different ways.

Let us begin our analysis by considering in greater detail what makes the phrase יֹשֵׁב הכרבים problematic. Although it is true enough that the lack of a preposition represents a translation issue, this is a very common problem that is to be expected for the specific grammatical feature under examination, the construct state. In Biblical Hebrew, a construct state provides no precise information as to the relationship between the nouns involved; by definition, it does not include an intervening preposition. Rather, the relationship between the words must be determined by context. There are numerous acceptable possibilities for interpreting construct states.[71] In the case under consideration, we have a masculine singular Qal active participle יֹשֵׁב in the first position (called *nomen regens*, or "governing noun" by grammarians). With nominalized participles like יֹשֵׁב, it is common for the construct state to be used instead of a preposition in order to express a

[71] For a detailed list of how the Biblical Hebrew construct state might be understood, see Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed., SubBi 27 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2008), 434–44.

relationship between two nouns.[72] When translating constructions such as this, then, a preposition generally needs to be supplied. The question, of course, is which preposition?

Regarding the second problem—that the two words can each mean several different things—Eichler notes that the verb יָשַׁב has a few meanings in Biblical Hebrew, most basically "to sit" or "to dwell" (sometimes also "to reign"). As for the cherubim, there are three basic types attested in the Hebrew Bible: the word may refer either to living winged creatures, or to two- or three-dimensional representations of these beings. A potentially related question concerns the number of cherubim indicated by the phrase. Are there two cherubim only, or more than two? Whatever the precise nature and number of the cherubim, we may agree on a fairly straightforward literal translation of this construct chain: "the sitter (or inhabitant) of the cherubim," or simply "the cherubim sitter." The problem is that this is not the way we speak in English! Such a phrase makes little sense to us.[73] Again, in order for the phrase to conform to acceptable English usage, we need to insert a preposition in translating to clarify the relationship between the two nouns.

In the majority of cases where the construct chain "*yošeb* x" occurs in the Hebrew Bible (238 times, by Eichler's count), it refers to a person who lives in a particular location (x). Most of the time, we may render the phrase "occupant of a town or a place." In such cases, the simple genitive construction is perfectly intelligible in English. But if we apply this pattern to the nouns of יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים, the results are problematic. What would

[72] See Joüon and Muraoka 121*n* (p. 387), where numerous examples of this construction are translated with various appropriate prepositions. Joüon and Muraoka list יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים here, translating according to the common practice as "seated on the cherubim."

[73] Unless we imagine that the deity is someone who could be paid to watch your needy cherubim while you go on vacation (cf. English "babysitter," "dogsitter").

it mean for a deity to occupy cherubim? In fact, "the occupant of the cherubim" is one of six historical interpretations assessed by Eichler. In discussing this option, Eichler notes that the rendering "occupant of the cherubim" is nonsensical in English. And yet, surprisingly, this is the interpretation he considers to be superior among the six historical interpretations that he discusses. His reason for advocating this option is that, in the Hebrew Bible, "*yošeb* x" almost always refers to someone who lives in a particular place. Based on this evidence, Eichler believes he has solved the first puzzle: *yošeb* in a construct state must mean "one who lives/dwells."

To refine this translation and make it comprehensible in English, Eichler inserts a preposition, "among," with the resulting translation, "who dwells among cherubim." In support of this choice of preposition, he points to the only other instance in which we see "*yošeb* x" where x may refer to multiple living creatures in the Hebrew Bible. In Gen 4:20, we are introduced to a man named Adah, who is said to be אבי יֹשֵׁב אהל ומקנה, "father of a tent dweller and cattle" (translated literally). Here it should be noted that the final words ("and cattle," ומקנה) may not belong to the construct chain at all. The NRSV, for example, renders the phrase "those who live in tents and have livestock." Eichler chooses to regard מקנה as part of the construct chain, translating the verse as "those who dwell (in tents and) among herds." According to this understanding of the phrase, then, he claims that Gen 4:20 provides adequate support for inserting the preposition "among" in his translation of יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים.

This understanding of יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים is not entirely implausible. It makes sense if we envision the deity dwelling among a host of supernatural creatures. To corroborate his translation, Eichler refers to two other biblical texts where Yhwh is pictured "as a deity

who dwells in a community of heavenly beings"[74]: Yhwh sits among heavenly hosts in the vision of Micaiah in 1 Kgs 22:19, and winged seraphim attend to him in the vision of Isaiah (Isa 6:1–2). It is noteworthy, however, that in both of these visions, Yhwh is pictured as not merely sharing living space with these creatures (i.e., dwelling among them), but is specifically said to be seated upon a throne (יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא) in their midst.[75] Since Eichler proposes that the relationship between Yhwh and the cherubim is analogous to his relationship with these other supernatural creatures, then perhaps Eichler's translation of יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים would best be amended to "the one who *is enthroned* among the cherubim." Of course, such a translation would deviate from the methodology Eichler has employed to reach his conclusion. But, as I will demonstrate below, Eichler's methodology is problematic.

In order to evaluate Eichler's analytical method, it may be most effective to set up an analogous linguistic situation. Let's imagine that, millennia in the future, the English language as we speak it has died out and we are left with a limited corpus of written texts from which to decipher this now-ancient language and culture. We are attempting to understand a phrase that occurs rarely (about seven times) in the literature, "medical resident." Within our literary corpus, we find many examples (say, 238) of a similar construction: Boston resident, New York resident, Mumbai resident. We have correctly understood these phrases to mean "a person who lives in x," where x is a city or place. Since this is the meaning of the vast majority of such phrases, we might consider

[74] Eichler, "The Meaning of יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִים," 369.

[75] For a brief discussion of Yhwh's throne of Isaiah 6 in light of other divine thrones described in ancient Near Eastern literature, see Jonas C. Greenfield, "Ba'al's Throne and Isa. 6:1," in *Mélanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Mathias Delcor*, ed. A. Caquot, S. Légasse, and M. Tardieu, AOAT 215 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1985), 193–98.

ourselves justified in interpreting our less common phrase in the same way. We would thus translate the phrase as "a person who lives in medical."

This translation sounds strange. But, being clever linguists of the future, we have noted another occurrence of a similar phrase in the literature. One text refers to a "hospital resident." We are aware that "hospital" and "medical" belong to the same semantic category, and that these words are not proper place names but are related to illness. We have gathered that sick people sometimes live temporarily in a place called a hospital. Based on this supplementary information, we might tweak our translation of the unusual phrase, concluding that it should be understood as "a person who lives in a medical [facility]." But perhaps if we were to look more carefully at the texts describing the medical resident, we might observe that the person with this title does not appear to be sick but instead exerts a kind of professional authority. If we were to disregard these contextual clues and insist that we have arrived at the correct interpretation through grammatical analysis, then of course we would misunderstand the phrase. Without careful attention to literary context, we risk mistaking the doctor for the patient.

Similarly, in his zeal for analyzing grammatical data, Eichler neglects to pay sufficient attention to the context in which יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים occurs. The phrase appears seven times in the Hebrew Bible: 1 Sam 4:4, 2 Sam 6:2 (=1 Chron 13:6), 2 Kgs 19:15 (=Isa 37:16), Ps 80:2, 99:1. In three of the seven cases (1 Sam 4:4, 2 Sam 6:2 =1 Chron 13:6), the phrase clearly refers to Yhwh in relation to the Ark of the Covenant. In 2 Kgs 19:15 (=Isa 37:16) as well, scholars have argued convincingly that the Ark is being referred to.[76] It has also been frequently supposed that at least one of the examples from Psalms

[76] See, e.g., Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 25.

(99:1) may refer to the Ark as well. This idea is largely derived from the call to worship in verse 5: "Extol Yhwh our God and worship at his footstool (להדם רגליו)" (Ps 99:5). Even if this footstool is not intended to refer to the Ark, it nevertheless emphasizes that enthronement is an important theme of the psalm. Other scholars believe that the cherubim throne of Yhwh's Temple lies behind Psalm 80 as well.[77]

The connection between ישׁב הכרבים and the Ark is unsurprising, since the Ark is intimately associated with cherubim in other biblical traditions. As we have already discussed, the most detailed account of the Ark's form in Exodus 25 includes a description of two winged cherubim constructed from its gold cover. The Temple also contains larger specimens of cherubim built by Solomon that shelter the Ark according to 1 Kings 6 and 8. It is odd, then, that Eichler should decide that the cherubim of the phrase ישׁב הכרבים refer to the creatures living in Eden and not the pair of cherubim that are elsewhere so closely affiliated with the Ark.[78]

It seems that Eichler's main reason for suggesting that the cherubim refer to the creatures of Eden is because he has decided that, in the construction "*yošeb* x," the word *yošeb* must indicate "one who dwells."[79] We have already explained why this conclusion is based on faulty grammatical reasoning. That is, the mere fact that a word or

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[77] See, e.g., Hans Schmidt, "Kerubenthron und Lade," in *Eucharisterion: Studien zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments: Hermann Gunkel zum 60. Geburtstage*, ed. Hans Schmidt (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923), 120–44, at 129.

[78] It should be noted, however, that there are intriguing connections between the Temple as conceived in the Hebrew Bible and the Garden of Eden. For a learned discussion on the Solomonic Temple as a paradise, see Lawrence E. Stager, "Jerusalem and the Garden of Eden," *ErIsr* 26 (1999): 183–94.

[79] Another way to analyze the grammatical data would be to examine cases in which ישׁב is used in relation to the deity. In most instances where Yhwh is the subject of the verb, he is presented in the context of his holy sanctuary or as enthroned. See Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 26–27.

grammatical construction is used to denote a particular thing many times within a textual corpus does not mean it can or should be understood in that same way in all cases. Furthermore, since Eichler has identified only one other instance of *yošeb* x where x might possibly refer to living creatures, and this example appears to denote more than two creatures, he has decided that it is impossible for x ever to refer to only two creatures. Therefore, he rejects the possibility that x could refer to the pair of three-dimensional cherubim that flank the Ark in other biblical traditions (Exodus 25, 37; 1 Kings 6). Again, instead of choosing the interpretive option that would seem best to fit the literary context in which the phrase occurs—that is, one associated with the Ark and royal enthronement—Eichler decides to go with the option that conforms to his rather wooden grammatical analysis. Because God is pictured as walking about in Eden in Gen 3:8, and flocks of cherubim may live there as well (Gen 3:24; Ezek 28:13–16), then Eichler concludes that יֹשֵׁב הכרבים must refer to Yhwh as one who dwells in the Garden of Eden among these mythical creatures.

Eichler identifies the cherubim that Yhwh stations to the east of Eden as living creatures. But we know next to nothing about the cherubim of Gen 3:24. How many were stationed there, and what did they look like? It is conceivable that there were only two cherubim set up as guards, one on either side of an eastern entrance of the garden, for example. Furthermore, how can we be sure these cherubim were alive? Perhaps Yhwh set up imposing figures of cherubim as guards. After all, the other guardian of the road to the Tree of is an inanimate (though dynamic) object: the whirling flaming sword. It is therefore possible that the cherubim guarding Eden, like those flanking the Ark, were

also a pair of three-dimensional figures.[80] As for the Edenic scene described Ezekiel 28, only a single guardian cherub is mentioned here. Thus, neither text can even be said unquestionably to describe an Eden that is populated by multiple living cherubim. Based on these considerations, it appears far more likely that יֹשֵׁב הכרבים refers to Yhwh's enthronement upon a specific piece of furniture adorned with cherubim (i.e., the Ark or throne) than his dwelling in an Edenic realm among multiple living cherubim.

The Ark as Divine Throne

In discussing the form of the Ark in Samuel above, we indicated that one potential clue to its shape may be derived from the title associated with the Ark in 1 Sam 4:4 and 2 Sam 6:2, "the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh of Hosts, who is seated upon the cherubim" (ארון ברית יהוה צבאות ישב הכרבים). This title suggests that the Ark featured here is envisioned as being accompanied by cherubim figures in some way. Perhaps these cherubim are not to be identified with the figures described in Exodus 25. Nevertheless, if the Ark of Samuel is decorated with cherubim, we may well imagine that these figures are winged (since, according to all biblical texts that describe their physical form, cherubim have wings) and portable (since the Ark itself is pictured here as a portable object).

Eichler has argued against understanding the phrase יֹשֵׁב הכרבים as "the one seated upon the cherubim" and has demanded that all interpretations based on this translation be

[80] We should recall here that ancient Near Eastern literature often exhibits a high degree of fluidity in conceptions of animate and inanimate objects. A three-dimensional statue of a guardian figure might have been regarded as capable of movement and life. This appears to be the case with statues of huge bulls that guarded palaces in ancient Mesopotamia. As Zainab Bahrani notes with regard to these images, "The famous colossal winged bulls and lions bear inscriptions clearly stating that their function is apotropaic and suggesting that the colossi had the potential to become animate beings and walk off" (Zainab Bahrani, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* [New York: Zone Books, 2008], 52).

reevaluated. Among interpretations that he names as deriving from this translation is the concept of the Ark as a divine throne. Admittedly, the rendering of יֹשֵׁב הכרבים as "the one seated upon the cherubim" reinforces the idea of the Ark as throne; but it is hardly the only factor that points to such an understanding. We will nonetheless proceed to reevaluate the concept of the Ark as throne here by surveying other evidence that supports this view.

First, although the Ark is not normally referred to as a throne (כסא) in the Hebrew Bible, one biblical passage attests that the Ark of Yhwh was regarded as a divine throne in ancient Israel. In Jer 3:16–17, the prophet foretells a time when Jerusalem, rather than the Ark of the Covenant, would be called "the throne of Yhwh," כסא יהוה:

והיה כי תרבו ופריתם בארץ בימים ההמה נאם־יהוה לא־יאמרו עוד ארון ברית־יהוה ולא יעלה על־לב ולא יזכרו־בו ולא יפקדו ולא יעשׂה עוד: בעת ההיא יקראו לירושׁלם כסא יהוה ונקוו אליה כל־הגוים לשׁם יהוה לירושׁלם ולא־ילכו עוד אחרי שׁררות לבם הרע:

> **16** And when you increase and bear fruit in the land, in those days, says Yhwh, people will no longer say, "The Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh." It will not be cherished, and no one will remember it or miss it. Nor shall another be made. **17** At that time, *Jerusalem* will be called the throne of Yhwh, and all the nations will gather to it in the name of Yhwh, to Jerusalem. They will no longer follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts. (Jer 3:16–17)

Furthermore, within the Solomonic Temple and in the Tabernacle, the Ark is located at the place analogous to where the king's throne is situated in the palace built by Solomon.[81] The Holy of Holies thus appears to be the divine equivalent to the royal throne room. The Temple is called Yhwh's palace (היכל) in a number of biblical texts,

[81] For a diagram that shows the symmetry between the Solomonic Temple and palace, see Ziony Zevit, "First Kings," in *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Z. Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 684.

and Yhwh is frequently referred to as a divine king throughout the Hebrew Bible.[82] There are also many biblical passages that picture Yhwh as sitting on a throne, often in the Temple or the heavenly realm, sometimes on Mount Zion. In Exodus 15, the archaic poem also known as the "Song at the Sea," Yhwh is pictured as building himself a royal house following his conquest of the Egyptians:

17 תבאמו ותטעמו בהר נחלתך מכון לשבתך פעלת יהוה מקדש אדני כוננו ידיך: **18** יהוה ימלך לעלם ועד:

You brought them and you planted them on the mountain of your own possession,

the fixed place that you made for your enthronement, O Yhwh,

the sanctuary, O Yhwh, that your own hands established.

Yhwh shall reign forever and ever. (Exod 15:17–18)

As Jon D. Levenson notes concerning these verses, "Originally, this may have referred to Mount Sinai. But it is the land of Israel which becomes the sacred mountain, God's throne and his palace, from which he exercises cosmic sovereignty."[83]

In Ezekiel's vision of a new temple in Jerusalem, Yhwh speaks to the prophet and affirms that the Temple is in fact the proper location for the divine throne: "I heard a voice speaking to me from the Temple while the man was standing beside me. It said to me: Son of man, this is the place for my throne, and the place for the soles of my feet, where I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites forever" (Ezek 43:6–7a). The prophet Jeremiah also emphasizes the importance of the throne in the Temple, proclaiming: "A

[82] Mettinger argues that divine kingship is an important element in the "Zion-Sabaoth" theology. He points to numerous examples in which the deity is presented as king in relation to Zion, including Exod 15:18, Isa 6:5; 24:23; 33:22; 52:7; Jer 8:19; Ezek 1:26; Zech 14:9; Ps 24:9–10; 99:1, 4. According to Mettinger, the appellation Yhwh Sabaoth emphasizes the deity's kingship (Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 24).

[83] Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 136.

throne of glory (כסא כבוד), exalted from the first, is the place of our sanctuary!" (Jer 17:12).

If Yhwh is the divine king and the Holy of Holies represents his throne room, then it seems the Ark must be regarded as his throne. It is, after all, the centerpiece of the inner sanctum and the holiest piece of temple furniture. Several biblical sources attest that the presence of Yhwh occupies the space above the Ark and its attendant cherubim, and may therefore be imagined as seated upon the Ark. In Priestly literature, Yhwh is said to meet with Moses from over the cover of the Ark, between the two cherubim (Exod 25:22). Likewise, in Num 7:89, we read:

ובבא מֹשֶׁה אל־אהל מועד לדבר אתו וישמע את־הקול מדבר אליו מעל הכפרת אשר על־ארן העדת מבין שני הכרבים וידבר אליו׃

"Whenever Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with him, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the cover that was on the Ark of the Covenant, from between the two cherubim he spoke to him" (Num 7:89).

In Leviticus, Yhwh states that his divine presence hovers over the Ark in the Tabernacle:

ויאמר יהוה אל־מֹשֶׁה דבר אל־אהרן אחיך ואל־יבא בכל־עת אל־הקדשׁ מבית לפרכת אל־פני הכפרת אשר על־הארן ולא ימות כי בענן אראה על־הכפרת׃

"Yhwh said to Moses: Tell your brother Aaron that he should not come at just any time to the holy place within the curtain in front of the cover that is over the Ark, lest he die. For I will appear in a cloud above the cover" (Lev 16:2).

As we have already discussed, one title for the Ark connects it to Yhwh of Hosts, יֹשֵׁב הכרבים, "the one who is seated upon the cherubim" (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2). The

presence of Yhwh is also intimately associated with the Ark in Num 10:35: "Whenever the Ark set out, Moses would say, 'Rise up, O Yhwh! May your enemies scatter! May your adversaries flee before you!'" From this it may be deduced that when the Ark moves, God was thought to move as well.

Iconographic evidence from the ancient Near East corroborates the idea that the cherubim of the Ark formed a throne for Yhwh. A number of artifacts unearthed from the ancient Levant depict thrones flanked by figures of winged composite creatures.[84] Two ivory carvings from Late Bronze Age Megiddo attest to this type of throne. One of the ivories is a tiny three-dimensional throne model flanked by two winged sphinxes. The other is an ivory plaque depicting a luxurious scene: a king sits on a winged sphinx that supports his throne while attendants offer him refreshments and musical entertainment. We also have an image from the royal sarcophagus of Ahiram of Byblos that shows a figure (human or divine) seated on a throne flanked by winged creatures.[85] Finally, there is a Punic stela and a Sardinian scarab that depict the deity El seated upon a throne that is supported by similar figures.[86] It would appear, then, that royal thrones in the ancient

[84] Eichler is right to note that we cannot be certain that these creatures are cherubim ("Cherub: A History of Interpretation," 37–38). After all, they are not labeled as such, and we do not know exactly what generic cherubim looked like, as there is no single consistent account of these creatures' form in the Hebrew Bible. If we consider all biblical passages that provide a physical description of the cherubim, however, two features are consistent: they all have wings and at least one face. (Of course, we should bear in mind that the cherubim that are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible but whose form is not described, such as those in Gen 3:24, may not share these features.) Moreover, in some biblical texts, cherubim are clearly imagined as composite creatures, with characteristics of other animals, including the bull, lion, eagle, and human (see Ezekiel 1; 10). The cherubim as described in the Hebrew Bible, then, could well correspond to the winged composite creatures that flank the thrones in these ancient Near Eastern artifacts.

[85] This relief dates to about the tenth century BCE.

[86] For drawings of these images, see Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, "YHWH Sabaoth: The Heavenly King on the Cherubim Throne," in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays*, ed. Tomoo Ishida (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 109–38.

Near East were commonly adorned with winged creatures that resemble biblical descriptions of cherubim.

These images may not perfectly align with the description of cherubim accompanying the Ark in Exodus or Kings, but we should bear in mind that other throne forms are possible. Moreover, the biblical text does not offer details regarding the form or configuration of cherubim associated with the Ark in certain texts, such as the Ark Narrative. Perhaps the cherubim figures alluded to in 1–2 Samuel would have flanked the Ark in a manner similar to the winged creatures that adorned the typical royal throne as depicted in these artifacts.

Although the Ark of Yhwh is not mentioned by name in the book of Ezekiel, several prophetic visions include vivid scenes involving cherubim that bear the divine throne. In his inaugural vision as presented in Ezekiel 1, spectacular creatures appear to the prophet by the river Chebar in Babylon. Each of these four creatures has four faces—the face of a lion, a human, an eagle, and an ox[87]—and four wings. Two of the wings are outstretched, touching the wings of their neighbors. The other two wings cover their body, which is human in form. The two legs of the creatures are fused into a single leg with a single foot that resembles a calf's hoof. These four beings are connected and move about as a unit, either by flying or traveling about on their gleaming wheels. (Each creature also has one wheel positioned at its base.) Like a wheeled cart, the living creatures can move straight ahead in any direction. Above the heads of the creatures, on a

[87] In the parallel vision of these creatures in chapter 10, where Ezekiel identifies them as cherubim, they are said to have the face of a lion, a human, an eagle, and a cherub (Ezek 10:14). This has led some interpreters to conclude that the basic form of the cherub is an ox, since the face of the ox from Ezek 1:10 is now being referred to as that of a cherub (see Eichler, "Cherub: A History of Interpretation," 32–34). But whether the prophet saw the same face in the two visions (and thus, ox face = cherub face), or whether he saw two different faces in each vision, we cannot know for sure.

sort of icy platform (רקיע), is a throne upon which a radiant divine figure is seated. Recalling the voice that spoke with Moses from over the Ark's cover and between its cherubim in Num 7:89, here too a divine voice speaks out from above: ויהי־קול מעל לרקיע אשר על־ראשם, "there was a voice from over the platform which was above their heads" (Ezek 1:25). In a very similar vision described in Ezekiel 10, we learn that these creatures are to be identified as cherubim. Again, the prophet witnesses a divine throne situated above the cherubim:

וארא והנה אל־הרקיע אשר על־ראש הכרבים כאבן ספיר כמראה דמות כסא נראה עליהם:

"I looked, and behold! Above the platform which was over the heads of the cherubim, something like sapphire, in appearance like the form of a throne, was visible above them" (Ezek 10:1).

The foursome of cherubim in Ezekiel is often thought to be based on biblical descriptions of the Ark in Exodus and Kings. Marvin A. Sweeney suggests that Ezekiel has harmonized the two biblical descriptions of the cherubim that accompany the Ark in Exodus 25 and 1 Kings 6; each of these passages describes a pair of cherubim, and so Ezekiel sees the sum of these cherubim in his visions.[88] Ezekiel's cherubim may also recall the wheeled cultic stands described in 1 Kgs 7:27–37, which were decorated with cherubim, lions, and oxen. Although the wonderfully bizarre visions of Ezekiel conjure up cherubim in an unprecedented form, these passages nonetheless bear witness to the enduring concept of cherubim as bearers of Yhwh's throne.[89]

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[88] Marvin A. Sweeney, "Ezekiel," in *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Z. Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1046–47.

[89] Two other biblical texts (2 Sam 22:11 and Ps 18:11) picture Yhwh as riding on a cherub. Both describe the scene with identical words: ויִרכב על־כרוב ויעף, "he rode upon a cherub and flew." Perhaps these texts

Some scholars have argued that it is preferable to envision the Ark as Yhwh's footstool, and its cherubim as forming the throne proper.[90] Three primary reasons are adduced in support of this argument. First, in 1 Chron 28:2, the Ark is set in synonymous parallelism to a footstool. In this scene, King David explains how he had intended to build a temple to house the Ark of Yhwh: "I desired to build a house of rest for the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh, for the footstool of our God." Since a footstool is part of a throne, however, it is entirely possible that what we have here is a case of synecdoche—a literary device whereby a part of an object is used to refer to the whole. Alternatively, as McCarter notes: "The ark with its appurtenances could be thought of as Yahweh's throne as well as his footstool."[91] Yhwh's footstool is mentioned in a few other biblical texts as well, but 1 Chron 28:2 is the only instance where it is presented in parallel to the Ark.

Second, the cherubim that Solomon is said to have constructed for the Temple are very large, ten cubits high and ten cubits wide, according to 1 Kgs 6:23–26. It is important to remember that the dimensions of the Ark are not provided in this passage. Scholars have nevertheless surmised that this Ark would have been roughly the same size of the Ark described in Exodus 25.[92] If this were true, then the Ark would have been

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envision Yhwh riding on the back of a winged cherub as on horseback. Alternatively, they might imagine Yhwh as riding in a chariot pulled by a winged cherub. In either case, here as well, the divine presence is specifically positioned upon the cherub; hence, the cherub remains a kind of seat for the deity.

[90] Among scholars who regard the Ark as Yhwh's footstool and the cherubim as the divine throne are: Menahem Haran ("The Ark and the Cherubim: Their Symbolic Significance in Biblical Ritual," *IEJ* 9 [1959]: 89–94); Tryggve Mettinger (*The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 23 et passim); C. L. Seow ("Ark of the Covenant," *ABD* 1:386–93, at 387).

[91] McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 108.

[92] Mettinger, for example, assumes that the dimensions of the Ark placed in the Temple matches those given for the Ark in Exodus 25. In a footnote, he does acknowledge some uncertainty with respect to the size of the Ark that was placed in the temple: "Since the dimensions of the priestly tabernacle are normally

quite small in relation to the cherubim that towered above it. Therefore, it has been suggested that the box-like Ark would make an appropriate footstool for the massive cherubim throne. (Again, however, we might inquire as to the form of the Ark that was placed in the Temple. If this Ark corresponds to the description given in Exodus 25, then it should also have gold cherubim on its cover. Perhaps, then, the large cherubim of Solomon's Temple function as guardian figures for the smaller cherubim throne positioned below.)

Finally, as de Vaux has pointed out, several ancient footstools have been discovered that contain legal contracts. A document describing a treaty made between the Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses II and the Hittite king Hattusilis III, for example, was put in a box that also served as a footstool for the gods Re and Teshub.[93] It has been suggested that the Ark of the Covenant was similarly regarded as a divine footstool that contained the treaty sealed between Yhwh and the Israelites.[94]

Based on this evidence, it is plausible that the Ark was in some cases imagined as Yhwh's footstool. This concept seems most appropriate for the scenario presented in 1 Kings 6 and 8, where the Ark and cherubim are distinct entities. Again, although we cannot be sure of the dimensions of the Ark imagined in these texts, the cherubim in 1

(but not invariably) half of the Solomonic temple, one cannot preclude the possibility that the Ark of the temple was actually 3 cubits high" (Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth*, 20n5).

[93] R. de Vaux, *Bible et Orient* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1967).

[94] Another interesting fact that may be taken into consideration here is that, in the Greco-Roman world, statues of gods were brought to life when a symbol of that god was inserted in the statue. As noted by Patricia Cox Miller, "when the material *symbola* proper to a specific god were inserted into the hollow cavities in the statue, the statue was 'animated' or activated with the divine power channeled through the levels of being by those *symbola*, revealing divine wisdom in the form of oracles and enabling human participation with wisdom" (Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination*: *Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009], 33).

Kings 6 and 8 are clearly very large. Thus, it may well be the case that the cherubim were regarded as Yhwh's throne here and the Ark as his footstool. In Exodus 25 and in the Ark Narrative, however, it appears that the Ark and cherubim are inseparable entities. We might concede that the Ark and cherubim may have been regarded as a kind of throne-unit in these texts as well.

But in other biblical passages, the Ark itself appears to be regarded as the primary symbol of Yhwh's enthroned presence. Although cherubim are clearly associated with enthronement, some biblical texts that speak of the Ark as Yhwh's seat do not mention cherubim (e.g., Jer 3:17, Num 10:35, Lev 16:2). Midrashic literature also states that the earthly Ark corresponds to Yhwh's heavenly throne (*Num. Rab*. 4:13). Based on the evidence outlined here, we may safely conclude that the Ark itself was commonly regarded as a divine throne in many biblical and post-biblical traditions.

Conclusion

From this discussion, it should be clear that a careful reading of biblical texts yields numerous Arks. Differences in formal descriptions of the Ark and cherubim (in Exodus 25, Deuteronomy 10, and 1 Kings 6–8) may reflect various ways of imagining the function of the Ark, either on a literary or practical level. In the section above, I examined evidence that the Ark was understood as Yhwh's throne within certain biblical traditions. I do not claim, however, that the Ark is always and everywhere conceived as a throne in biblical literature. It is undeniable that the Ark is also described as a container for the covenant; this appears to be its primary function in Deuteronomy 10, for

example.[95] Understanding the Ark as a container for the law may not be entirely incompatible with the Ark as Yhwh's throne, but it seems that these are two distinct roles. Texts like Exodus 25 may represent an attempt to harmonize these two traditions: Ark as container and Ark as throne.[96] As we will discuss at greater length in subsequent chapters, the function of the Ark and its relationship to Yhwh also appear to have been conceived in various ways in ancient Israel.

Moreover, if we attempt to read the Hebrew Bible as a historical record of the Ark's fate, the possibility of multiple physical Arks emerges as well. By now our hypothetical treasure hunter is likely bewildered by the many options regarding where he should look, what he should look for, and if he should bother seeking a biblical Ark at all. Whether we wish to pursue the Ark of the Covenant from a literary or historical perspective, it must be admitted that the biblical text does not offer any single consistent picture of this object. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of *the* Ark at all without qualification. In the chapters to follow, we will focus our attention on how Yhwh's Ark is portrayed within a particular biblical book or corpus. In chapter 2, we discuss the Ark in Joshua, and in the following chapters, we will concentrate on the portrayal of the Ark in 1–2 Samuel. But even within these limited perspectives, it will be necessary to continue to refer back to the characterization of the Ark in other biblical texts.

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[95] But Ian Wilson makes a strong case that the Ark is not therefore entirely "demythologized" in the book of Deuteronomy, as scholars have often claimed (Ian Wilson, "Merely a Container? The Ark in Deuteronomy," in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day [London: T&T Clark, 2005], 212–49).

[96] On the relationship between the idea of the Ark's form in Deuteronomy vs. in Priestly literature, see McCormick (*Palace and Temple*, 183–90), who proposes that the Ark was originally a box in Deuteronomy but that the Priestly author attempted to combine D's Ark with the older idea of a prominent divine throne derived from Zion-Sabaoth theology.

It is advisable, perhaps, for aspiring treasure hunters and literary critics alike, to begin their quest by pursuing a single plausible form of the Ark of Yhwh. In the next chapter, I will analyze the Ark as a throne in the book of Joshua, setting this conceptual form against other tales involving divine thrones within ancient Mesopotamian literature.

CHAPTER 2

NERGAL'S CHAIR AND YHWH'S THRONE AS AGENTS OF VIOLENT BORDER CROSSING

The Mesopotamian myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* recounts how these two deities—Ereshkigal, reigning queen of the Netherworld, and Nergal, the god of war and plague—became spouses and together ruled the realm of the dead. Two versions of the story have come down to us.[97] In the older manuscript found at El-Amarna, which dates to approximately the fourteenth century BCE, Nergal offends Ereshkigal's vizier, Namtar, at a heavenly banquet. As a result, Ereshkigal summons Nergal to the Netherworld with the intent of killing him. Nergal submits to this order, but aggressively resists death; rather than descend peaceably to the Netherworld, Nergal storms the region and overtakes its queen by force. To help accomplish his violent conquest, the god Ea gives

[97] The most recent critical text edition of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* is the eighth volume of the SAACT series by Simonetta Ponchia and Mikko Luukko, *The Standard Babylonian Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal*, SAACT VIII (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2013). Ponchia and Luukko focus on the Neo-Assyrian version of the tale. For a text edition of the Amarna version, see Shlomo Izre'el, "New Readings in the Amarna Versions of Adapa and Nergal and Ereškigal," in *Kinattūtu ša dārâti, Raphael Kutscher Memorial Volume*, ed. A. F. Rainey (Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology, 1993), 51–67. Recent translations of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* may be found in Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2005), 506–24; Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 163–81; and Giovanni Pettinato, *Nergal ed Ereškigal, il poema assiro-babilonese degli inferi* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2000). Important scholarly works on *Nergal and Ereshkigal* include: Manfred Hutter, *Altorientalische Vorstellungen von der Unterwelt. Literar- und religionsgeschichtliche Überlegungen zu "Nergal und Ereškigal"*, OBO 63 (Freiburg, Schweiz: Universitätsverlag, 1985), which also provides a full translation of both the Amarna and Sultantepe texts; Erica Reiner, "Nergal and Ereškigal: Epic into Romance," in *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut: Poetry from Babylonia and Assyria* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 50–60; Neal Walls, "Desire in Death's Realm: Sex, Power, and Violence in 'Nergal and Ereshkigal'," in *Desire, Discord, and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth* (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2001) 127–82; and Rivkah Harris, "Gender and Sexuality in the Myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*," in *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 129–46.

Nergal fourteen fearsome demons, which he stations at each of the gates of the Netherworld so that he can rush past these heavily guarded borders and ambush the queen. Only after Nergal seizes Ereshkigal by her hair and she realizes she is overcome, does the queen offer a proposal of marriage and joint rule to her assailant, which he happily accepts. So the story ends, concluding the brief and turbulent courtship: Nergal "seized her and kissed her, wiping away her tears."[98]

A much longer version of the tale is preserved in two manuscripts—from Sultantepe, we have a seventh-century text,[99] and from Uruk, a fourth-century fragment. These manuscripts appear to tell the same story, and together they make up what we know as the Neo-Assyrian version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. In this telling, Nergal also disrespects Namtar and is obligated to descend to the Netherworld as punishment for his misconduct. Instead of assigning a troop of demons to accompany Nergal on the dangerous journey, however, in this account Ea advises Nergal to take with him only one item: a chair (GIŠ.GU.ZA). Considering that Ea issues precise instructions on felling particular trees to craft this piece of furniture, it seems the chair should be endowed with a special significance. And yet, perhaps due in part to the fragmentary nature of these texts, the chair is not featured in the rest of the story, which describes a passionate love affair between the two deities that ends in much the same way as the earlier tale from Amarna. We are left to wonder, then, precisely how this piece of furniture may have assisted Nergal in his mission to the Netherworld. Although its function has been debated

[98] Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses*, 512.

[99] Some scholars (e.g., Foster, *Before the Muses,* 506) date the Sultantepe manuscript to the eighth century BCE.

by scholars, a satisfying explanation has yet to be proposed for the significance of Nergal's chair.

After evaluating various scholarly views regarding the function of the chair in the Neo-Assyrian account of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, I will suggest a new interpretation of Nergal's chair that may be supported by parallels from the Hebrew Bible. I propose that Nergal's chair enabled him to cross the boundaries of the Netherworld at will. The function of the chair is thus consistent with that of the demons in the older Amarna version of the story. As with the demons, Ea prescribes the chair to Nergal in order to grant him the ability to cross the gates of the Netherworld without permission from Ereshkigal. I observe that the Ark of the Covenant, which is conceived as Yhwh's throne in many biblical texts, serves an analogous function in the conquest narratives of Joshua. There, Yhwh gives Joshua instructions for how to undertake certain acts of miraculous border-crossing—namely, traversing the Jordan River and the formidable walls of Jericho—that grant the Israelites passage into the land of Canaan, which they would then conquer. On both occasions, the Ark of Yhwh stands at the center of the border-crossing ritual.

The motif of inanimate obstacles yielding to clear a path for the divine king is also attested in a number of psalms and other biblical texts that herald the procession of Yhwh. In these biblical texts, Yhwh is presented primarily as a warrior. Sometimes he enacts violence through a retinue of demonic forces, and other times—as in the books of Joshua and Samuel—Yhwh's destructive energy manifests itself as a piece of furniture, the Ark. Similarly, Nergal is portrayed in the Amarna version of the myth as being

accompanied by demons; in the Neo-Assyrian tale, however, I argue that Nergal's destructive border-crossing powers are located in his chair, or throne.

Scholarly Theories on the Function of Nergal's Chair

Perhaps the simplest explanation for the purpose of Nergal's chair is that he takes this seat with him to the Netherworld in order to avoid sitting on the chair that would be offered him there.[100] This view is consistent with Ea's warning that Nergal should refuse all forms of hospitality presented to him in the Netherworld. Upon hearing that Nergal is about to embark on a journey to the realm of death, the crafty god Ea issues two sets of instructions. First, as we have already mentioned, Nergal is supposed to cut down trees and construct a special chair. Second, Ea tells Nergal that he must reject all amenities offered to him in the Netherworld. He must not sit on the chair presented to him; he must not partake of their bread, meat, or beer. He must not indulge in a footbath; nor should he permit himself to become aroused when Ereshkigal takes off her clothes and reveals her naked body to him. It seems that, if Nergal scrupulously follows both sets of instructions, he may have a chance—however slim—of returning from the "Land of No Return."

It is thus sensible to presume that Nergal brings his own chair so that he can sit down without accepting the seat offered him in the Netherworld, thereby maintaining his autonomy. But this seemingly straightforward solution is problematic for several reasons. First, although Nergal obeys Ea's command to refuse the chair presented to him in the Netherworld, it does not appear that he is able to do so because he sits on his own chair instead. In fact, nowhere does the text indicate that Nergal (or anyone else, for that

[100] This interpretation is supported by Piotr Steinkeller (personal conversation, February 26, 2015).

matter) ever actually sits on this chair. Second, had Ea wished to provide Nergal with his own chair so that he could more easily decline the one offered to him in Ereshkigal's domain, we might naturally expect that Ea should also advise Nergal to take his own food and drink with him so as not to be driven by hunger or thirst to accept any Netherworld refreshments. And yet we see that Nergal manages to resist the offers of bread, meat, and beer despite the fact that he has not packed his own lunch.

Finally, if we support the view that Ea gave Nergal a chair in order to help him refuse the temptations of the Netherworld, we must concede that Ea's intended safeguard is ultimately a failure. For although Nergal successfully shuns all other amenities, he is not able to resist that most intimate offer of hospitality: when Ereshkigal strips for her bath a second time and bares her flesh to Nergal, he "[gave in to] his heart's [desire to do what men and women do.] The two embraced each other / And went passionately to bed."[101] And there they remain for six amorous days. Perhaps no chair or equivalent item exists that could have prevented Nergal from succumbing to the erotic allure of the goddess. And yet if Nergal is not able to resist the entire inventory of proscribed Netherworld pleasures, then he has failed in carrying out Ea's plan, and—according to Steinkeller's view—so has the chair, since it does not enable Nergal to refuse Ereshkigal's hospitality. In sum, this interpretation of the chair would be more satisfying had Ea provisioned Nergal with a full set of items corresponding to the forbidden amenities and if Nergal was thereby rendered capable of resisting all Netherworld temptations.

[101] Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia,* 171.

Other scholars attribute greater success to Nergal's chair. Stephanie Dalley, for example, has proposed that the piece of furniture served to protect Nergal from death, comparing it to the "ghost's chair" that is described in the following Babylonian ritual text:

> If a man is chosen for death, and a ghost has seized him, you must purify everything … place a bread ration before Shamash, Ea, and Marduk, threefold; scatter dates, flour, set up three *adagurru*-vessels, set up three censers with aromatics, scatter all kinds of cereals. You must put down a chair to the left of the offerings for the ghost of his kin…

Dalley draws a connection between the man chosen for death here and the god Nergal, who is about to descend into the Netherworld: "Thus, Nergal takes the chair down in an attempt to ensure that he can escape from the Underworld and elude death."[102] Like the unfortunate victim in the ritual text, Nergal is threatened by death; he wishes to return safely from the "Land of No Return." In this way his situation is similar to the man designated for death in the account of the "ghost's chair." But the problem with this analogy is related to the specific function of the furniture. In the ritual text, it seems the chair is set up beside the offerings so that a ghost can sit and enjoy the food items that are being presented to appease it. Setting up a chair in this case constitutes an act of hospitality towards the ghost, which is expected to help deliver the man from death.[103]

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[102] Ibid., 163.

[103] In her voluminous study on "ghost-induced illnesses" in Mesopotamia, JoAnn Scurlock observes that offerings of food and drink were regularly made to gods or beneficent ghosts in order to enlist their help in combatting the hostile ghost who had seized a human victim. Scurlock notes that, on rare occasions, a chair was set up along with the food and drink so the potentially helpful spirit could sit and eat: "The god seems usually to have been expected to stand, but once a seat was provided, spread with a *mišḫu*-cloth. Once the preparations for the sacral meal were complete, the *āšipu* politely withdrew and prostrated himself, so that the god could eat in peace" (JoAnn Scurlock, *Magico-Medical Means of Treating Ghost-Induced Illnesses in Ancient Mesopotamia* [Leiden: Brill, 2006], 45).

Yet the same logic does not apply to the chair that Nergal takes with him to the Netherworld. Who is supposed to sit in Nergal's chair and assume the role of the ghost in the ritual text? If Ereshkigal is the intended sitter, what purpose would her sitting serve? Unlike the man attempting to propitiate the ghost, Nergal is a foreigner in the Netherworld and is thus in no position to offer hospitality to Ereshkigal; nor does he bring the queen any offerings that she may better enjoy while sitting. We see, moreover, that Ereshkigal already has her own throne, and this seat in no way deters the lady from attempting to ensnare the virile Nergal. Without further evidence, then, Dalley's interpretation is unconvincing.

Rather than serving to help Nergal elude death, as Dalley proposes, Benjamin Foster suggests that the chair may have been an appropriate accouterment of Nergal's death: "Since in some periods a chair was part of expensive interments, his carrying the chair may have been seen as a rite of death, though in reality it prepares him to assume kingship of the netherworld, standing for his throne of kingship."[104] Here Foster is claiming that the chair Nergal takes with him to the Netherworld represents his eventual position as ruler of that region. It is difficult to deny that this could be the case, since Nergal does in fact become king in the end. Foster's comment concerns the literary function of the chair as a foreshadowing device. But his brief interpretation does not address any expectation on the part of the characters that the chair might actively *do* anything for Nergal on the plane of the story's action.

If we examine the text, however, it appears the chair is regarded as possessing a distinct power. When Nergal announces to Ea that he is about to embark on a journey to

[104] Foster, *Before the Muses*, 507.

the Netherworld, Ea expresses concern regarding the dangerous mission. Ea's immediate response to Nergal's proposal is not well preserved. Foster translates, "When Ea heard this, he said to himself, '[Let me bring it] about that I send …'"[105] Regarding this portion of broken text, Foster notes: "Uncertain. Ea evidently wishes to ensure that Nergal will survive the journey to the netherworld."[106] It is presumably in order to equip Nergal for a safe homecoming, then, that Ea orders Nergal to build a special chair as well as to refuse Netherworld hospitality. The detailed description of this chair in the Neo-Assyrian account suggests that it has a special significance. Moreover, as an object crafted according to the instructions of Ea, the quintessential trickster god, we might well anticipate that the chair should be endowed with extraordinary powers.

Precisely how the chair is expected to assist Nergal is not obvious from this account. We have considered Dalley's idea that it may have functioned like a "ghost's chair," a place for spirits to sit and relax while partaking of the offerings intended to propitiate them. Other scholars have contended that the chair itself should be regarded as an offering to Ereshkigal. Rivkah Harris proposes that the gift of a fine chair may have sufficed to placate the angry goddess.[107] Erica Reiner, on the other hand, views the gift of the chair as something of a trap: "The gift is to ensure his admittance into the nether world as Anu's messenger; the choice of a throne may have another desired effect: Ereshkigal, in leaving her throne to occupy the new one, would thereby relinquish her

[105] Ibid., 515.

[106] Ibid., 515n1.

[107] Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, 130.

status of queen."[108] Although Reiner's interpretation would represent a sensible solution to the puzzle, it is not supported by the textual evidence. Nowhere does the text indicate that Nergal offers the chair to Ereshkigal or that the queen ever sits on Nergal's chair. In fact, both versions of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* end in the same way—with Nergal seizing Ereshkigal by the hair while she is seated on her own throne. Apart from this moment of endangerment, the queen appears to maintain full access to her throne throughout the course of Nergal's visits.

There is also no explicit indication that Nergal's chair is meant to serve as a gift for Ereshkigal. Although a chair is offered to Nergal in the Netherworld, he is not said to offer his chair to anyone else in turn. After spending six days in Ereshkigal's bed, on the seventh day Nergal slips away from the queen, who is devastated when she wakes to find him gone. The abandoned Ereshkigal protests Nergal's departure vociferously, crying out to her father Anu and threatening to release the dead to devour the living if her lover is not returned to her. When Nergal does in fact decide to venture a second time to the Netherworld, he is again commanded: "You shall carry the chair."[109] Presumably, this refers to the same chair that Nergal carried with him on his first visit to Ereshkigal. If so, then Nergal must have carried his chair out of the Netherworld as well. Thus, unless Nergal presented the chair as a gift to Ereshkigal and then stole it from her on the way out

[108] Reiner, *Your Thwarts in Pieces, Your Mooring Rope Cut*, 52.

[109] Dalley, 175.

(an unlikely way to appease the queen), it does not appear that the chair carried back and forth by Nergal was ever intended as a peace offering to Ereshkigal.[110]

Given the problems with each of these theories, it is no wonder that some scholars simply conclude, "The identity and purpose of Nergal's chair remain obscure."[111]

The Case for Nergal's Chair as Border-Crossing Agent

We have now considered a number of views on the function of Nergal's chair in the Neo-Assyrian version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. Although none of these theories is without merit, I have explicated the reasons why I find them less than satisfying. I will now begin to build a case for my own theory regarding the significance of this furniture. I suggest that, like the demons that Ea gives to Nergal in the Amarna account, the chair enabled Nergal to traverse the heavily guarded gates of the Netherworld without Ereshkigal's consent.

I believe a strong case can be made for this function of Nergal's chair with evidence drawn from Mesopotamian myths and ritual texts. In support of my thesis that Nergal's chair enables the god to pass into and out of the Netherworld, I discuss several parallel Mesopotamian myths in which heroes are permitted to traverse this cosmic border with the help of the trickster god Ea/Enki. We have already noted how, in the Amarna account of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, Nergal succeeds in breaking through the Netherworld gates by means of the demons provided by Ea. In other Mesopotamian

[110] It is possible that Nergal's chair was intended to resemble a gift for Ereshkigal, and this is how he was permitted to bring the powerful seat with him to the Netherworld in the first place. If so, Nergal's chair would share much in common with the famous Trojan Horse, which was only masquerading as an impressive gift. In reality, neither the huge wooden horse nor the fancy chair was ever *actually* a gift, but a fake gift used to smuggle a sort of weapon into a heavily fortified enemy city.

[111] Neal Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death*, 177n27.

myths of trips to the realm of the dead, most notably *Ishtar's Descent* and *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*, we observe that Ea is likewise portrayed as controlling mysterious keys that can unlock the normally impregnable Netherworld borders. These literary parallels support my thesis that the chair prescribed by Ea possesses special border-crossing powers.

I will then consider the question of how the chair operates as a border-crossing agent in the Neo-Assyrian tale. I suggest that the chair may have been animated by destructive supernatural forces, possibly even the same demonic powers featured in the Amarna account. Although a demon-possessed piece of furniture may seem far-fetched upon first glance, there is a venerable tradition of objects being animated by divine powers in Mesopotamian literature. It is a well-known fact that anthropomorphic statues of deities regularly underwent an animation ritual known as the "mouth-opening" (Akkadian *Mīs Pî*) ceremony; afterward, the statue was regarded as being alive and infused with divine power. I have already explained why I am unconvinced by the connection made by Dalley between Nergal's chair and the chair to be set up for a ghost in one particular ritual text. But the fact that chairs often served as loci for spirits in rituals of sickness and death is quite suggestive for our study. Some Mesopotamian funerary texts even describe a tradition of setting up chairs for the potentially dangerous spirits of recently dead people to inhabit on their way to the Netherworld.[112]

[112] On this point I am indebted to JoAnn Scurlock's essay, "Soul Emplacements in Ancient Mesopotamian Funerary Rituals," in *Magic and Divination in the Ancient World*, ed. Leda Ciraolo and Jonathan Seidel, Ancient Magic and Divination II (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1–6.

Above all, the Amarna version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* offers a valuable backdrop against which the Neo-Assyrian tale may be productively read.[113] I analyze the relationship between these two tales and explain how, in my view, the extended Neo-Assyrian version serves to aggrandize Nergal, presenting him as even more powerful than the Nergal of the Amarna account. In the Neo-Assyrian tale, Nergal is not only given the opportunity to demonstrate his sexual potency, but he also accomplishes the astonishing feat of returning from the Land of No Return, thereby showing himself eminently capable of conquering death. If the chair is the key to Nergal's crossing of boundaries, as I propose, then this object plays a crucial role in the hero's elevation.

Cosmic Border Crossing in *Nergal and Ereshkigal*

Let us begin, then, by examining each occasion where Nergal crosses the borders of the Netherworld in both accounts of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. In the Amarna version, there is only one trip: Nergal descends to Ereshkigal's domain with the goal of conquest. He storms the doors of the Netherworld with the assistance of Ea's demonic troops, and the forceful ambush is a success: Nergal is not killed but is offered an honored position as ruler of the Netherworld.

In the Neo-Assyrian tale, by contrast, we find three instances of Nergal's crossing between the realm of heaven and that of death. First, Nergal goes down to the Netherworld, having been summoned by Ereshkigal. In this initial descent, Nergal gains

[113] Ponchia and Luukko also believe the Neo-Assyrian tale may represent an ideological re-conception of older traditions such as the one attested in the Amarna version. As they note, "The fact that authors, redactors or copyists had more ancient sources at their disposal for elaborating and combining traditional motifs is attested, for example, by the presence of texts in Neo-Assyrian libraries, such as the bilingual editions of an Old Babylonian hymn to Nergal and of a *balag*-lamentation, or of the longest Sumerian lament over Damu's death (*Edina-ušagake*), known from Old Babylonian copies" (xiii).

entry by crossing the borders in a properly sanctioned way. Standing at the door of the Netherworld, he is greeted by a gatekeeper, then identified by Namtar, and finally granted Ereshkigal's permission to pass through the seven gates.

The second time Nergal crosses this boundary, however, he ascends from the Netherworld against the will of the queen. Precisely how he accomplishes this feat is not clear from the text. Despite the fact that Ereshkigal denies his request to leave after their six days of lovemaking, it seems that Nergal nevertheless manages to trick the gatekeeper into letting him escape. In Dalley's translation,

> Nergal went [ ]
> [ ] addressed his speech to the gatekeeper,
> "Ereshkigal your lady sent me,
> Saying, 'I am sending you to the heaven of Anu our father,'
> So let me be allowed out! The message [ ]."
> Nergal came up the long stairway of heaven.[114]

That Ereshkigal did not actually dispatch Nergal to the heavenly court or sanction his departure is obvious from her dramatic reaction when Namtar informs her that Nergal has disappeared: "Ereshkigal screamed with a terrible voice and fell to the ground [fro]m the throne. She straightened herself up [fro]m the ground, tears were raining from her eyes, her tears were runn[ing o]n the wall of her [n]ose: 'Erra, (my) lover, my lust, I was not sated with his charms when he went away! Erra, (my) lover, my lust, I was not sated with his charms when he went away!'"[115]

On the third and final occasion of border crossing, Nergal once again descends to the Netherworld. This journey closely resembles Nergal's storming of the gates in the

[114] Dalley, 171.

[115] Ponchia and Luukko, 29 (lines 284–92).

Amarna account. In both instances, an infuriated Ereshkigal wants Nergal to come down to her—and in both cases the god does in fact descend, but his coming is not in accordance with the established rules of entry. Rather, in a show of manly aggression, Nergal forces his way past the gatekeepers and enters the Netherworld on his own terms, bursting into Ereshkigal's courtyard unexpectedly and seizing the queen on her throne. This is the manner by which Nergal secures kingship of the Netherworld in both versions of the myth.

In the Amarna account, Nergal accomplishes his ambush with the help of demons, which he stations at each of the gates. The purpose of the demons is straightforward, as is the method by which they assist Nergal in accomplishing his mission. Before his descent to the Netherworld, Nergal expresses dismay, convinced he will be killed, but Ea tells him, "Don't be afraid [ ] I shall give to you seven and seven [demons] To go with you."[116] We then see that Nergal stations these demonic troops—named Flashes-of-Lightning, Bailiff, Croucher, Expulsion, Wind, Epilepsy, Vertigo, Collapse, Lord-of-the-Roof, Burning Fever, and Scab[117]—at each door of the Netherworld, presumably to strong-arm the gatekeepers, allowing him to rush past the heavily guarded borders and ambush the queen: "He gave his troops orders: 'Let the doors / Be opened! Now I shall race past (?) you!' / Inside the house, he seized Ereshkigal / By her hair, pulled her from the throne / To the ground, intending to cut off her head."[118] As we know, Nergal does

[116] Dalley, 179.

[117] There are fourteen demons in total, but the names of three of them are not attested in this fragmentary text. Translations of demon names are from Dalley, 179; and Ponchia and Luukko, 52.

[118] Dalley, 180.

not kill the queen but kisses her after Ereshkigal proposes marriage and suggests that they rule the realm of the dead together.

The Neo-Assyrian tale also seems to indicate that Nergal violently overcomes every gatekeeper in the course of his final descent. But how he achieves this is not entirely clear from the text as we have it. Dalley's translation reads: "He struck down Nedu, the doorman [of the first] gate, and did not let him gr[apple with him (?)]" (from the transliteration *^{lú}atû ša KÁ [ina 1-en] KÁ i-**nar**-šu-ma ana ti-[iṣ-bu-ti?] ul i-din*).[119] The translation of Ponchia and Luukko is almost identical to Dalley's, except that they understand the first verb differently. Instead of *i-**nar**-šu-ma*, Ponchia and Luukko read the verb *i-**lul**-šu-ma*, translating: "The keeper of the [first] gate he hanged, he didn't let him to *ha*[*nd-to-hand fight*]."[120] The same cuneiform sign may denote *nar* or *lul*, and both options yield intelligible 3cs G preterite verbs, from either the middle-weak *nêrum*, "to strike, kill" (Dalley) or from *alālum*, "to hang (up), suspend" (Ponchia and Luukko). Attached to the end of the verb is the masculine singular object suffix *-šu*, which is here understood to refer to the gatekeeper, with Nergal as the subject. Since the gatekeeper (*^{lú}atû*) is in the nominative case, we might expect that he would be the subject of the verb. This is in fact how O. R. Gurney and Benjamin Foster understand the sentence, as we will see. But the reading of Dalley and Ponchia/Luukko is entirely plausible as well, if we take *^{lú}atû* as a nominative absolute, or *casus pendens*. The suffix *-šu* is to be expected in such a situation, since in Akkadian, "the noun or noun phrase that is topicalized in this

[119] Ibid., 175.

[120] Ponchia and Luukko, 31 (lines 389–90, reading *LÚ.Ì.DU$_8$ šá KÁ* [*1-en ina*] *KÁ i-**lul**-šu-ma ana ti-*[*x x x*] *ul i-din*).

way is always replaced in its clause by an appropriate pronoun suffix."[121] A more literal translation of the sentence would be: "As for the doorman of the first gate—he [Nergal] struck/hung him…"

Also affixed to the first verb is the enclitic particle *-ma*, which indicates that the clause is closely connected to—and usually also "logically subordinate" to—the following clause.[122] The second half of the sentence is fragmentary, but the translations of Dalley and Ponchia/Luukko provisionally fill in the gap with the Gt infinitive, *tiṣbutum*, "to grasp or grapple with one another."[123] The English rendering by Ponchia and Luukko is quite awkward here, but the sense of both translations is that Nergal commits some violent act against the guard of each gate, thereby preventing these potential opponents from wrestling with him. If we imagine the logistics of such a scenario, it seems far more likely that Nergal might manage to disable his opponents with a swift, heavy blow rather than with a quick hanging. Thus, I find Dalley's verb choice (*i-**nar**-šu-ma*, "he struck him") to be preferable to that of Ponchia and Luukko (*i-**lul**-šu-ma*, "he hung him") in this case. The ditto sign in the following six lines indicates that whatever took place at the first gate occurs at the rest of the gates as well.

Prior to his second descent in the Neo-Assyrian account, Nergal is commanded: "You shall carry the chair" (GIŠ.GU.ZA *lu-ú na-*[*šá-ta*][124]). It appears that Nergal is

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[121] John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, 2nd ed., HSS 45 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 212.

[122] Ibid., 50.

[123] From the root *ṣ-b-t*, with a metathesis of the normally infixed *-t-*. For a brief discussion of metathesis in the Gt stem (and a list of forms), see Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian*, 390.

[124] Ponchia and Luukko, 21 (line 376).

commanded to carry things in the next six lines as well, but unfortunately the text is broken here, and any other objects he may be intended to carry are not legible. It has been suggested that the items are weapons, perhaps the same ones he wielded prior to his first descent—a flashing sword, an axe, possibly a net[125]—or those that Nergal is shown handling in the subsequent lines: a strap and a bow.[126] If we could decipher any other objects Nergal is instructed to carry here, this might help us to understand the purpose of the chair. If Nergal is in fact told to take other weapons, for example, then we might conclude that the chair should also be understood as a weapon. It is also possible that no additional items are named in these missing lines, but that the command to carry the chair is simply repeated. In any case, these lines offer no further insight regarding how Nergal's chair is supposed to operate in the course of this mission. The only indication of the chair's purpose here may be gleaned from the lines describing the border crossing itself—a violent struggle, according to most renderings. From this it may reasonably be deduced that the chair Nergal carries is intended to assist him in forcefully overcoming the gatekeepers.

Cosmic Border Crossing in Other Mesopotamian Myths

O. R. Gurney interprets Nergal's final border crossing quite differently in his 1960 publication of the Sultantepe manuscript. He translates the terse episode as follows: "The porter of the gate hung up [his *throne* at] the gate and did not allow (him) *to take* [*it*]"

[125] In Ponchio and Luukko's translation of line 104, there is a net (a common weapon in ancient Near Eastern warfare). Other translations, such as the one by Dalley, list only the sword and axe, and it seems these objects may refer to the tools with which Nergal fells the trees to make his chair, and not to separate items that Nergal takes along with him as weapons to the Netherworld.

[126] So Ponchio and Luukko, 62.

(from the transliteration, ^{lú}*atû ša bābi* [^{giš}**kussâ-šú** ina] *bābi i-**lul**-šu-ma ana* TI-[**e-šú**] *ul i-din*).[127]

Thus, he also reads the verb as "to hang (up)" (*alālum*). But unlike Ponchia and Luukko, Gurney understands the gatekeeper as the subject of the verb, and the object as Nergal's chair. Grammatically, it is strange that there should be two accusatives here, the pronominal suffix *-šu*, as well as the (reconstructed) noun [^{giš}kussâ-šú]. One of these is redundant, and so Gurney does not include both in his translation.

Although the same event occurs at each of the rest of the gates, Gurney does not infer from this that Nergal possessed seven chairs. Rather, he suggests that each gatekeeper takes a piece of the chair (or some other item) from Nergal until his furniture is entirely dismantled. In this way, Nergal is prevented from bringing his chair into the Netherworld. Gurney's interpretation is based on a similar scene in the *Descent of Ishtar*, where the goddess is incrementally stripped of her clothing and accessories at each of the seven gates until she arrives in the Netherworld stark naked.

Gurney makes what occurs in the *Descent of Ishtar* into a general rule: "Anyone seeking admittance there as a permanent resident has to submit to being relieved of an article of apparel or equipment by the porter at each of the seven gates. Nergal must therefore carry with him certain objects (details are not preserved), presumably in order that the porters may be satisfied without depriving him of his essential needs."[128] In other words, Nergal was given items (the chair, and perhaps other objects) to take with him to

[127] O. R. Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets (Continued): VII. The Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal," *AnSt* 10 (1960): 105–31, at 127 (lines 21–22, Col. VI).

[128] Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets (Continued)," 106.

the Netherworld just so that these items could be taken away from him according to the supposed custom of stripping guests seeking permanent residence there. If this procedure were known from other texts apart from the *Descent of Ishtar*, we might be justified in calling it a custom and assuming it was the standard procedure for admitting gods or long-term residents. But Gurney does not name any other stories where this occurs, nor does he reckon with the problematic fact that the same procedure is not described for Nergal's initial descent.

Benjamin Foster also understands these lines to indicate that, as in the *Descent of Ishtar*, something was taken from Nergal at each of the seven gates. In his view, however, it is not Nergal's chair that is taken from him, but, like Ishtar, his clothes are removed. Thus Nergal also enters the Netherworld naked. Foster suggests that, as Ereshkigal's lover, the nakedness of Nergal gives him an erotic power: "While the dead entered the netherworld naked, here his nakedness may have sensuous impact, especially since he enters without forewarning."[129] Contrary to the view that undressing the dead represents a standard Netherworld practice, Dina Katz has argued that the stripping of Inanna/Ishtar is a unique occurrence, a ruse that renders the sex goddess vulnerable to her sister's violent assault.[130]

In Foster's interpretation, then, Nergal gets to keep his chair. But again, how the chair is meant to assist Nergal is unclear. If Foster sees Nergal's nakedness as making him irresistible to the queen, then perhaps the chair is also intended to aid his seductive

[129] Foster, *Before the Muses*, 508.

[130] Dina Katz, "Inanna's Descent and Undressing the Dead as a Divine Law," *ZA* 85 (1995): 221–33.

[130] Foster, *Before the Muses*, 508.

efforts. Foster comes close to implying this when he notes that, in the Neo-Assyrian version, Nergal does not rely on demons to accomplish his mission but rather "uses his nakedness and the throne to gain his end."[131] But how this piece of furniture should function as an aphrodisiac is unclear. Would Ereshkigal really be so aroused by a naked man holding a chair?

The main interpretive difficulty of this particular section describing Nergal's second descent, of course, is determining what is meant to occur in these broken lines of text. The fact that even the visible cuneiform signs may be interpreted in various ways only exacerbates the problem. According to Gurney's early transliteration of the Sultantepe text, for example, Nergal may not take a chair with him on the initial journey,[132] and thus Gurney does not draw any connections between the chair Nergal takes along on his final descent and the one he carried the first time he went down. More recent renderings of the Neo-Assyrian version consistently understand Nergal as having constructed a chair prior to his initial descent, which Ea tells him to take along to the Netherworld.[133]

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[131] Ibid., 509.

[132] Regarding what Nergal is instructed to build from the wood of the forest before his initial descent, Gurney states: "We do not understand the purpose of Ea's first instructions to Nergal (col. ii, 21–35), involving the felling of trees and the carving of three objects" ("The Sultantepe Tablets [Continued]," 107). Just after this work is described, Gurney tentatively translates "a throne" (col. ii, line 35), but he does not necessarily understand this to be the finished product of Nergal's construction efforts.

[133] Some recent translations of the Amarna manuscript suggest that Ea may have also presented Nergal with a chair to take to Ereshkigal in the older, abbreviated version of the myth. See, e.g., Foster, *Before the Muses*, 510, and Ponchia and Luukko, x. These translations are based on the suggested reading of a particular cuneiform sign by Shlomo Izre'el: "The old crux 1 us-sa-a at the beginning of l. 42, finds its final rest with the suggestion proposed here. The first sign should definitely be read as [k]u rather than 1, which now makes perfect sense in its context. The line has its parallel in the recent recensions of the epic of Nergal and Ereshkigal, where Ea would not let Nergal descend to the netherworld and meet with Ereshkigal before supplying him with a special throne and giving him strict instructions concerning his visit. This gesture seems to have been a significant (perhaps even symbolic) act, which demands careful examination

It is not unreasonable for Gurney to look to the myth of *Ishtar's Descent* for clues for interpreting the Neo-Assyrian version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. A number of lines appear verbatim in these two texts, and both tell of a god who descends to the Netherworld and encounters Ereshkigal there. Moreover, in both tales, the gods manage to accomplish the seemingly impossible: they come back from the Land of No Return. In my view, however, it is the circumstances of these gods' "illegal" escape from the Netherworld, rather than those of their lawful entry, that constitute a significant interpretive parallel between these two myths. That is, Nergal and Ishtar both depend on the cunning assistance of Ea/Enki for their release from Ersehkigal's clutches.

The tale of Ishtar's descent is also known from two different versions, in this case a longer Sumerian text and an abbreviated Akkadian text. Ishtar, the goddess of sex and war (Inanna in Sumerian), decides to go down to the Netherworld, possibly with the intention of taking over the territory from her sister, Ereshkigal. As discussed above, Ishtar is stripped of her articles of clothing and jewelry at each of the seven gates. Upon Ishtar's arrival in the Netherworld, the two sisters tear into each other. The upshot of their struggle is that Ereshkigal kills Ishtar. In the Sumerian tale, Ereshkigal turns her sister into a chunk of meat and hangs her on a nail.

In the absence of Ishtar, all fertility on earth languishes. Hoping to remedy this sorry state of affairs, Ea devises a plan to free Ishtar from the Netherworld. In the Sumerian story, Enki concocts two peculiar beings from the dirt under his fingernails. (In the Akkadian myth, he creates only one: a male prostitute named "Good-looks the

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and thought (cf. Bottero and Kramer 1989:460). Ea, mentioned in l. 41, is, hence, the actor in this situation, and Nergal, now restored at the end of l. 43, is the one who receives the throne" ("New Readings in the Amarna Versions of Adapa and Nergal and Ereškigal," 63).

playboy."[134]) Being endowed with special charms, these characters manage to work their way into Ereshkigal's good graces and then secure from her an oath, requesting acts of hospitality from her: they ask her for the water-skin or the meat (i.e., Ishtar!), and Ereshkigal is apparently bound to grant their wish.[135]

It is through the cleverness of Ea, then, that Ishtar is allowed to exit the Netherworld against the will of Ereshkigal. More specifically, Ea creates deceptive alluring beings and dispatches them to the Netherworld with the purpose of securing the release of a god who descended there, a god whom Ereshkigal would have preferred to keep captive. Clearly, we have a similar plotline in the story of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. But instead of concocting illustrious creatures to rescue Nergal from the Netherworld, in this tale Ea supervises the crafting of a beautiful—and possibly duplicitous[136]—chair that allows Nergal to escape the land of death.

Another Mesopotamian myth in which Ea/Enki grants someone release from Ereshkigal's domain is the Sumerian account of *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*. In this tale, the prize possessions of Gilgamesh fall into the Netherworld, and he is distraught over their loss.[137] Gilgamesh's servant Enkidu bravely volunteers to

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[134] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 158.

[135] Following the interpretation of Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, "How Was Queen Ereshkigal Tricked? A New Interpretation of the Descent of Ishtar," *UF* 3 (1971): 299–309.

[136] See note 14 above.

[137] Interestingly, Gilgamesh constructed these two objects (*ellag* and *ekidma*) with wood from an extraordinary *halub* tree that he felled for Inanna. The goddess is said to have plucked the tree from the banks of the Euphrates and nurtured it in her garden. She desired to make furniture for herself—specifically, a luxuriant chair and a bed—from its wood, but the tree came to be inhabited by ominous creatures: a snake, an Anzud bird, and a female phantom. Gilgamesh assists Inanna by expelling these residents from the tree, then cutting it down and giving its wood to Inanna for her furniture. He also crafts these two items for himself using the wood of the same special tree.

travel to the Netherworld and fetch these items. But the reckless Enkidu declines to heed his master's advice on how he should conduct himself on his mission to the Netherworld, and as a result, he dies and is stuck there. Gilgamesh first goes to Enlil to plead the case of his unfortunate companion, but Enlil offers no help. It is only when Gilgamesh entreats Enki that he receives any useful assistance. Enki opens up a hole in the Netherworld, puncturing its skin so that Enkidu can travel up from the Netherworld and recount its eerie conditions to Gilgamesh. Here again we see that among the gods, Enki demonstrates a unique skill in securing the release of Netherworld captives by breaching its borders.

Without the active intervention of Ea/Enki, however, the situation is quite hopeless for those trapped in the Land of No Return. Considering this mythological context, it would seem highly unlikely that Nergal should manage to transgress the Netherworld borders by his own wiles in our Neo-Assyrian tale, receiving no useful assistance from Ea. It also seems implausible that Ea should expressly equip Nergal for his journey with an object that fails to help him in any significant way. Rather, we should expect that the chair crafted under Ea's guidance would prove instrumental in Nergal's successful escape from death.

The Chair as a Locus for Spirits in Ancient Mesopotamia

How, then, might Nergal's chair have functioned at the gates of the Netherworld? I would like to explore the possibility that the chair may have been animated by destructive supernatural powers that allowed Nergal to force his way through the gates of the

Netherworld, first fleeing the Netherworld after his lovemaking with Ereshkigal, and then returning to overtake the queen.

Let's first consider the construction of Nergal's chair. Ea gives Nergal specific orders for crafting this piece of furniture prior to his journey to the Netherworld: "Go down to the forest of *mēsu*-trees, / Cut down *mēsu*-trees, *tiaru*-trees, and juniper! / Break off *kanaktu*-trees and *simberru*-trees."[138] It is noteworthy that Ea tells Nergal to make his chair out of *mēsu*-trees. From the name of Nergal's temple in Kutha—Emeslam, which means "house of the thriving *mēsu* tree"—we know that Nergal has a special connection to this tree. Nergal is sometimes also called Meslamtaea, "He who comes forth from the thriving *mēsu* tree."[139] Moreover, this type of wood was used to construct divine statues in ancient Mesopotamia. In the Erra Epic, *mēsu* wood is heralded as the "flesh of the gods."[140] Construction of a divine image usually involved crafting a wooden core and overlaying it with gold and silver. The divine statue was then richly adorned with lavish

[138] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 167. I have chosen to focus my attention on *mēsu* wood here, since we have reason to believe divine images were crafted from this material. But it has been suggested that the other types of wood may also possess ritual significance. Ponchia and Luukko note: "the choice of the type of wood has a ritual significance. … it may hint at the exorcists' world, who made protective statues of wood, including tamarisk, *e'ru*, cedar and juniper, to be placed at entrances and in rooms, or to be used in incantations and purification practices" (42). For our discussion, it may be relevant that other types of wood used to make Nergal's chair were customarily set up for magical or protective functions at entrances. This may suggest that the wooden chair, too, should prove particularly effective at points of entry such as the Netherworld gates.

[139] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 17. This interpretation of Meslamtea is uncertain, however. Scholars agree that the name means "one who has come out of Meslam," but Wiggermann has suggested Meslam "may be understood as a Semitic *nomen loci* meaning 'place of peace'" (F. A. M. Wiggermann, "Nergal. A. Philologisch," *RlA* 9: 215–23, at 217). For an extended discussion on the meaning of Nergal's name, see the articles by Piotr Steinkeller and W. G. Lambert: Steinkeller, "The Name of Nergal," *ZA* 77 (1987): 161–68; Lambert, "The Name of Nergal Again," *ZA* 80 (1990): 40–52; Steinkeller, "More on the Name of Nergal and Related Matters," *ZA* 80 (1990): 53–59; Lambert, "Surrejoinder to P. Steinkeller," *ZA* 80 (1990): 220–22.

[140] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 291.

clothing and jewels. We see, too, in the account of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, that after cutting down the sacred wood, Nergal "dresses up" his chair in a way that imitates the adornment of divine statues, painting it to resemble the luster of gold, silver, and precious stones: "He painted it with [as a substitute for silver], / Painted it with yellow paste and red paste as a substitute for gold, / Painted it with blue glaze as a substitute for lapis lazuli. / The work was finished, the chair complete."[141]

Following the construction of a divine image, the carefully crafted figure would undergo a special ceremony, the *Mīs Pî*, or "mouth-opening" ritual, during which a deity was invited to inhabit the object. After this procedure, the figure was regarded as alive and infused with divine power. As Irene Winter puts it, "the material form [of the statue] was animated, the representation not standing for but actually manifesting the presence of the subject represented. The image was then indeed empowered to speak, or to see, or to act, through various culturally-subscribed channels."[142] Following the *Mīs Pî*, then, the object took on, at least in part, the identity and power of the deity it represented. For this reason, divine images were often referred to as "gods" in ancient Mesopotamia.

It is unlikely that Nergal's chair was shaped anthropomorphically. But a number of Mesopotamian texts describe non-anthropomorphic objects that are animated by similar powers as divine statues. As one scholar observes, "It is important to realize that the *mis pi* ritual was not limited solely to anthropomorphic 'statues,' but could also be used for other objects which were considered to embody the divine, such as a lunar

[141] Ibid., 167.

[142] Irene Winter, "'Idols of the King': Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia," *JRitSt* 6 (1992): 13–42, at 13.

disk."[143] In some cases, divine or royal possessions, including pieces of furniture, also underwent mouth-opening ceremonies. At Mari, for example, the *Mīs Pî* ritual was applied to Shamash's footstool and standard. Another tablet describes a mouth-opening ceremony performed for precious stones that were affixed to a royal chariot; here it seems the *Mīs Pî* was expected to empower these jewels to protect the king.[144]

Although Nergal's chair does not undergo a mouth-opening ceremony in our myth, this does not rule out the possibility that it may have been animated by supernatural powers. Barbara Porter has drawn attention to various objects belonging to Mesopotamian deities that appear to operate like divine beings in their own right, whether or not they are said to have had their mouths opened. In particular, she points out that musical instruments and furniture, including divine thrones and beds, were sometimes seen as having distinct agency, and even received elaborate offerings.[145] In such cases, it seems these objects were feared as if they themselves were capable of inflicting harm or granting blessings to their human attendants. The throne of Enlil is one example of a prominent deified chair in ancient Mesopotamia. The name of this throne is preceded by the DINGIR sign, which indicates its divine status. It is referred to as ^{d}GU.ZA ^{d}EN.LÍL.LÁ ("the divine throne of Enlil"), or simply ^{d}GU.ZA ("the divine throne"). We

[143] Angelika Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik*, OBO 162 (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1998), 18.

[144] Christopher Walker and Michael Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual*, SAALT 1 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001), 13.

[145] Barbara N. Porter, "Blessings from a Crown, Offerings to a Drum: Were There Non-Anthropomorphic Deities in Ancient Mesopotamia?" in *What Is a God? Anthropomorphic and Non-Anthropomorphic Aspects of Deity in Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. Barbara N. Porter (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 153–94.

have records of the throne itself receiving special offerings in Enlil's temples at Nippur.[146]

Furthermore, even if the *Mīs Pî* was not explicitly applied to Nergal's chair, we should bear in mind that this piece of furniture was conceived by Ea, who plays a special role in the animation of divine images. When Marduk's statue is shown to be in need of refurbishing in the poem of *Erra and Ishum*, the god cries out, "Where are the Seven Sages of the Apsu, the holy carp, who are perfect in lofty wisdom like Ea, their lord, who can make my body holy?"[147] Marduk's "body" here is his statue, which was constructed from *mēsu* wood, "the flesh of the gods." If Ea and his sages were deemed responsible for animating objects made of *mēsu* wood, then it would seem very likely that Ea could also endow Nergal's *mēsu*-wood chair with powerful spirits.

A significant connection between anthropomorphic images and furniture is discussed by JoAnn Scurlock in her essay, "Soul Emplacements in Ancient Mesopotamian Funerary Rituals." Scurlock describes how ancient Mesopotamians imagined a successful transition between death and the afterlife. When a person died, his or her ghost would separate from that person's body and would eventually adopt a different manner of being in the Netherworld. Yet even after death, people still needed to be cared for: they received offerings of food and drink and required assistance in making a successful transition to the realm of the dead. Neglected ghosts, or those who were not

[146] As noted by Gebhard J. Selz, "'The Holy Drum, the Spear, and the Harp': Towards an Understanding of the Problems of Deification in Third Millennium Mesopotamia," in *Sumerian Gods and Their Representations*, ed. I. L. Finkel and M. J. Geller, CM 7 (Groningen: Styx, 1997), 167–213, at 178. For other references to Mesopotamian thrones with divine status, see N. Schneider, "Götterthrone in Ur III und ihr Kult," *Or* 16 (1947): 56–65.

[147] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 292.

properly ushered into their new existence, could inflict tremendous harm on the living. Scurlock notes that the time just after death was a critical and precarious period in the life of a ghost, and so at the funeral ceremony, "To make sure that the ghost received his offerings, and that they were not stolen by uninvited guests, ancient Mesopotamians provided a specific locus for the souls."[148] That is, they would set up an object for the ghost to inhabit on its way from the body to the Netherworld. Whereas the elite members of society would often commission a gold or silver statue of the dead person for this purpose, most people would have been unable to afford such a luxury. Instead, we have evidence that chairs were frequently used as a temporary residence for ghosts. For our study, it is remarkable that chairs were commonly regarded as functioning as an effective locus for potentially dangerous spirits, much as a statue of a god or a human could be infused with the essence of that personality.

Nergal's Astonishing Resurrection

The Neo-Assyrian tale of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* emphasizes that the Netherworld is the Land of No Return. The very first statement in the story confirms the strict divisions between the gods' heavenly dwelling and the depths of the Netherworld, as Anu declares to Ereshkigal (through his messenger, Kakka): "It is impossible for you to come up. … And it is impossible for us to go down."[149] When Nergal sets off for the Netherworld, he is described as going "To the house which those who enter cannot leave, / On the road

[148] JoAnn Scurlock, "Soul Emplacements in Ancient Mesopotamian Funerary Rituals," 1.

[149] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 165.

where traveling is one way only."[150] And yet somehow the wily Nergal manages to return from there quite easily. After dallying for six days in Ereshkigal's bed, on the seventh day, Nergal leaves the Netherworld against the will of the queen, who is surprised, then enraged when she discovers that her lover has absconded.

Given the rules of the universe as attested in Mesopotamian mythology, Ereshkigal was right to be surprised and enraged that her lover had left her; this was supposed to be impossible. Only messenger gods and demons had the capacity to cross the boundaries of the Netherworld at will, and even these designated border-crossers could be detained at one of the Netherworld's seven guarded gates.[151] Moreover, according to the logic laid out in the myth, Nergal's sexual activity with Ereshkigal should have made it even more difficult for the god to get away. After all, Ea had warned him specifically not to allow himself to become aroused by Ereshkigal; thus, sleeping with the queen should have ensured Nergal's captivity in the Netherworld.

It appears that Nergal gets past the gatekeeper by telling him a lie, claiming that Ereshkigal had commissioned him as a messenger to Anu. But one wonders why any unfortunate resident of the Netherworld wouldn't make similar claims if the gatekeeper were so gullible. If Nergal really escaped by means of this simple lie alone, then the menacing title of Ereshkigal's kingdom, "the Land of No Return" would seem laughable. Nergal does appear to escape with great ease, but here too, I believe Nergal must have benefitted from Ea's ingenuity. Although Nergal's chair is not mentioned at this crossing,

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[150] Ibid., 168.

[151] Ponchia and Luukko, 35, 38. See also Gurney, who states that "the immutable laws of the universe have confined the *dei superi* and the *dei inferi* in their respective realms and neither can visit the other. Only messengers can pass between" (Gurney, "The Sultantepe Tablets [Continued]," 106).

we have seen that Nergal is told to take the chair when he descends to the Netherworld a second time. Thus, it would seem that Nergal must have also been carrying his chair during this occasion of crossing. Again, considering that Ea miraculously released Ishtar from the Netherworld through crafty measures, it seems fitting that the chair connected to Ea would have also proved instrumental in Nergal's resurrection.

Unlike the Amarna version of the myth, the Neo-Assyrian *Nergal and Ereshkigal* grants our hero a return ticket from the Land of No Return. As a result, Nergal attains greater glory than in the more straightforward Amarna rendition of his conquest. In his resurrection, Nergal demonstrates his mastery of the entire system of life and death. Not only does he manage to storm into Ereshkigal's presence unannounced; he is also able to slip away at will. Having been given the key to navigate these treacherous borders successfully, Nergal can come and go from the Netherworld as he pleases.

Nergal's manly dominance is also accentuated by the love story that is detailed in the Neo-Assyrian version of the tale. Nergal is shown capable of pleasing the woman who had plotted to kill him. If making love for six days straight weren't sufficient evidence, Nergal's virility is confirmed by the queen's overwhelming desire for him. Ereshkigal wants Nergal so badly that she threatens to release the dead to consume the living if she doesn't get him back. As Rivkah Harris has observed, "Once Ereshkigal begins to love Nergal she becomes emotionally dependent on him for her happiness, and she loses her capacity to rule."[152] By contrast, Nergal comes and goes from his lover's underworldly embrace as he pleases; he maintains his independence and proves that he is capable of overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Without a doubt, the Nergal

[152] Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, 141.

of the Neo-Assyrian tale is shown to be virile and dominant, a suitable match for the queen and a hero worthy of ruling the Netherworld.

Legitimating a New Leader: Nergal and Joshua Crossing Borders

The tale of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, in both versions, functions as an etiology. Its purpose is to explain how it came to be that these two deities ended up ruling the Netherworld together. In the story, we witness a stitching together of two distinct traditions. Nergal plays the role of the underdog, the newcomer on the scene of a tradition where Queen Ereshkigal had at first ruled the realm alone.[153] As such, Nergal must prove himself a deserving ruler. I have suggested that the young god demonstrates his power primarily by passing through heavily fortified borders. In both versions of the story, Nergal is shown capable of breaking into the Netherworld and overcoming the queen on her throne. But I have argued that his conquest is more robust in the Neo-Assyrian account, since here Nergal not only breaks into the Netherworld but also breaks out. He not only dominates Ereshkigal physically by seizing her on her throne, but he dominates her sexually and emotionally: when he withdraws from the Netherworld, the queen suffers his absence with a violent intensity. It is through his mastery of border crossing, then, that Nergal is able to accomplish these feats and prove his worthiness as ruler.

The entire conquest narrative in the biblical book of Joshua likewise functions as a sort of etiology, in that it explains the transition between the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness and their settled life in Canaan. It also accounts for the transfer of leadership

[153] For details on the historical development of Netherworld mythology in relation to the reigns of Nergal and Ereshkigal, see Ponchia and Luukko, xxi–xxxv; Wiggermann, "Nergal. A. Philologisch," 215–23.

from the venerable Moses to a newcomer on the scene, the young warrior Joshua son of Nun. In these tales of conquest, the Ark of Yhwh plays an important role. Like Nergal's, Joshua's status of leader is legitimated through the miraculous border-crossing acts he accomplishes, in this case with the help of Yhwh, whose powers are manifest in the form of the Ark.

The Form and Function of the Ark in Joshua

The parallel between the heroes Joshua and Nergal becomes more intriguing when we consider the fact that the Ark of the Covenant is conceived as Yhwh's throne in many biblical texts. As we have discussed at length in chapter 1, the Hebrew Bible does not present a unified picture of the form or function of the Ark. We find two very different physical descriptions of the Ark in Exodus and Deuteronomy, for example. According to the Priestly account of its construction in Exod 25:10–21, the Ark is splendidly ornate: a regal chest crowned with a pair of gold cherubim, mythical creatures that stretch their wings over its solid gold cover. In Deut 10:1–5, however, the Ark is a simple wooden box made by Moses to house the tablets of the law.

We cannot be sure whether either one of these biblical descriptions of the Ark's form is operative in the book of Joshua, however, as there are very few details provided in the text regarding its physical appearance. As we discussed in chapter 1, several different concepts of the Ark are represented in the Deuteronomistic History itself. Thus, it is not possible to identify *the* form or function of the Ark in Dtr and then simply assign that profile to the Ark in Joshua as well (Joshua being one of the books traditionally designated as part of the Deuteronomistic History). When scholars operate according to

this method, they usually assume that the concept of the Ark as articulated in Deuteronomy may be applied to the rest of the books in the so-called Deuteronomistic History.[154] These scholars often run into problems, however, since the way the Ark is described in Deuteronomy does not seem to conform to the portrayal of the Ark in Joshua and especially the Ark Narrative.

As we have seen, Deuteronomy describes the Ark primarily as a container for the tablets of the law. Scholars have frequently remarked on the fact that, in Deuteronomy, the relationship between Yhwh and the Ark is presented in a distinctive manner. Whereas elsewhere, the presence of Yhwh is closely connected with the Ark, in Deuteronomy, the supernatural quality of the Ark is diminished. As Moshe Weinfeld states:

> The specific and exclusive function of the ark, according to the book of Deuteronomy, is to house the tablets of the covenant (10:1–5); no mention is made of the ark cover (כפרת) and the cherubim which endow the ark with the semblance of a divine chariot or throne (compare Exod. 25:10–22 = P).[155]

And yet Weinfeld does not take Deuteronomy's view of the Ark to apply to all other texts in the Deuteronomistic History. In fact, he points out that the authors of Deuteronomy appear to have intentionally expunged the idea (known from earlier biblical traditions)

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[154] E.g., Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 99–107. Sommer refers to a unified concept of the Ark among "the deuteronomists"—that is, in Deuteronomy as well as throughout the Deuteronomistic History. In his view, "According to the deuteronomists, the ark contains words spoken and written by God, and God ordered that written records of those words be placed in the ark … The deuteronomists took pains … to make sure that the special nature of these artifacts [the temple and the ark] would not lead people to see them as magical objects or as the earthly residence of the divine" (Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 101). Sommer proceeds to articulate a rather convoluted argument as to how this view of the Ark is actually supported by the Ark Narrative of 1 Samuel 4–6. We will address his discussion again at greater length in chapter 3.

[155] Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 208. Terrence Fretheim discusses possible reasons for the demotion of the Ark in his article, "The Ark in Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 1–14. A challenge to the traditional view of the Ark in Deuteronomy has been put forward more recently by Ian Wilson, "Merely a Container? The Ark in Deuteronomy," in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 212–49.

that the Ark performed an important military function in Israel's history. For example, Numbers 14 tells us that the Israelites' first attempt to invade Canaan, following the unfavorable report by the spies, ended disastrously. The Israelite forces were routed by the Amalekites and Canaanites because the Ark had not accompanied them on the battlefield: "They dared to go up to the heights of the hill country, despite the fact that neither the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh nor Moses had departed from the midst of the camp" (Num 14:44). By contrast, in Deuteronomy's account of the same event (Deut 1:42–43), the Ark is not mentioned. Rather, Yhwh commands the Israelites to refrain from engaging in battle, "for I am not in your midst" (Deut 1:42). Likewise, whereas Numbers relates that the Ark went in front of the Israelites to guide them in the wilderness (Num 10:33), in Deuteronomy it is Yhwh himself who leads the people (Deut 1:32–33). Weinfeld expressly contrasts the diminished military role of the Ark in Deuteronomy with the significant military function of the Ark in 1 Samuel 4, where the Ark accompanies the Israelites into battle against the Philistines.[156]

The view of the Ark's role in Joshua (and in the Ark Narrative) is thus much closer to the one articulated in Numbers than that of Deuteronomy. In fact, the conquest account of Joshua exhibits a fitting symmetry with the story recounted in Numbers 14. Whereas the Israelites' first attempt to take over Canaan failed miserably because the Ark was not with them (according to Num 14:44), their second attempt to conquer Canaan is a stunning success when the Ark accompanies the Israelites, demonstrating divine sponsorship of their war effort (according to Joshua 3–6).

[156] Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 209.

To be sure, the book of Joshua shares much with Deuteronomy and is generally thought to have undergone a Deuteronomistic redaction.[157] Two verses in Joshua specify that the Ark is carried by Levites (3:3, 8:33), which conforms to the commandment in Deut 10:8 that only Levites were permitted to handle the sacred Ark. This is generally taken as evidence of Deuteronomistic editing. It does not follow, however, that the way the Ark is described in Deuteronomy should therefore be applied unquestioningly to the characterization of the Ark in Joshua. It has also been noted that Josh 4:16 refers to the Ark as ארון העדות—an appellation that is elsewhere used exclusively in the Priestly source. This has led some scholars to argue that Joshua must have undergone a Priestly redaction as well.[158] But can we therefore assume that the form of the Ark of Joshua corresponds to its description in Exodus 25? Nowhere in Joshua are cherubim or gold mentioned in relation to the Ark, which we might expect if the Ark of Joshua were shaped like the Ark of Exodus. Then again, for all its emphasis on the theme of covenant, Joshua nowhere states that the tablets of the law are contained in the Ark, which we might expect had the author of Joshua wanted to recall the Ark's form and function as described in Deuteronomy 10.

We have observed that there are two basic concepts of the Ark's pragmatic form attested in the Hebrew Bible: that of container for the law, and that of throne for the

[157] Deuteronomy consists of Moses's hortatory addresses to the people, and the book of Joshua is likewise structured by speeches: by Yhwh (e.g., Josh 1:1–9), Joshua (e.g., Josh 23–24), and Rahab (Josh 2:9–13). There is also an emphasis on covenant in both Deuteronomy and Joshua; other shared themes include concepts of holy war, such as חרם, and the divine promise of the land to Israel. See also Gordon Wenham, "The Deuteronomic Theology of the Book of Joshua," *JBL* 90 (1971): 140–48.

[158] For a fuller summary of scholarly views on the possible Priestly and Deuteronomistic redactions of Joshua, see Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical, and Literary Introduction* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 82–90.

deity. In some texts, such as Exodus 25, the two functions appear to be combined. Deuteronomy is the only biblical book in which the function of the Ark is presented as *solely* a container for the law tablets. Since we have deduced that the view of the Ark in Joshua is not consistent with the one articulated in Deuteronomy, then we have no reason to conclude that the form of Joshua's Ark should match the simple wooden box described in Deuteronomy. Rather, if we may presume that the form of the Ark in Joshua might correspond to one imagined elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, then it makes sense to look to the Ark Narrative in Samuel for a parallel. The representation of the Ark in 1–2 Samuel most closely resembles the way the Ark is portrayed in Joshua. There, too, the Ark is featured as a dangerous protagonist, an object animated by Yhwh that performs crucial functions within an extended narrative of military conflict.

As noted in chapter 1, however, it is also difficult to determine the form of the Ark in 1–2 Samuel. One clue might be found in the designation of the Ark in 1 Sam 4:4 and 2 Sam 6:2, where it is called ארון ברית־יהוה צבאות יֹשֵׁב הכרבים , "the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh of Hosts, who is seated upon the cherubim" (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2). This appellation seems to corroborate the idea that the Ark and its cherubim constituted a throne or chariot for the warring deity. If this is how the Ark is to be imagined within the Ark Narrative, then we may be justified in imagining the Ark as Yhwh's throne in the book of Joshua as well, where it performs a similar role.

In sum, even though we cannot ascertain with certainty the form of the Ark in Joshua, we have sufficient evidence to make a reasonable assumption that this Ark may have been conceived as Yhwh's throne. In what follows, then, we will "try on" this

concept, exploring the idea of the Ark as Yhwh's throne in Joshua against the portrayal of Nergal's chair in the Mesopotamian myth.

The Ark of Yhwh as Border-Crossing Throne

We have argued that Nergal's chair enabled the one bearing it to cross the formidable borders of the Netherworld and, eventually, to seize control of the region. So too when the Israelites are poised on the brink of the Promised Land in the book of Joshua, Yhwh's throne plays a central role in the rituals that permit the Israelites to defy impassable boundaries and take over a coveted territory—in this case, the land of Canaan.

I will focus here on the function of the Ark within the conquest narratives in the book of Joshua, where it is featured in two crucial episodes. First, in Joshua 3–4, the Ark leads the Israelites across the Jordan River, whose waters stand up in a heap when the feet of the Ark-bearing priests touch it. Second, the Ark is instrumental in the attack against Jericho, the first Canaanite city taken by Joshua and his troops when its walls collapse before the invading Israelite army (Joshua 6). In both cases, Yhwh's Ark occupies a key position in ritual processions that break through otherwise impenetrable obstacles, allowing Joshua and the Israelites to traverse the borders of the Promised Land and take over new territory.

Construction of the Ark according to Divine Blueprints

As discussed previously, the Hebrew Bible preserves at least two distinct physical descriptions of the Ark, in Exodus 25 and Deuteronomy 10. We cannot be sure which, if either, of these descriptions corresponds to the form of the Ark in Joshua. Nevertheless,

we can safely say that by all biblical accounts, the Ark of Yhwh was constructed according to divine command. By far the most detailed description of the Ark's form occurs in Exodus 25, where Yhwh gives Moses precise instructions for how to build the Ark and other sacred furniture for the Tabernacle. Yhwh specifies that the Ark should be constructed from acacia wood (עצי שׁטים) and overlaid with gold inside and out (Exod 25:10–11). The description of the Ark in Deuteronomy is markedly different from the elaborate Priestly account. Here the Ark is a simple wooden box built by Moses himself in the wilderness as a container for the two stone tablets of the law (Deut 10:1–2). As in Exodus, here too Yhwh directly commands Moses to make the Ark, but in this case the divine instructions could hardly be more concise. He simply tells Moses, ועשׂית לך ארון עץ, "Make yourself an Ark of wood" (Deut 10:1). When describing how he carried out this divine order, however, Moses adds a remarkable detail: ואעשׂ ארון עצי שׁטים, "So I made an Ark of acacia wood" (Deut 10:3). Like the more ornate Ark described in Exodus, then, we are told that the plain Ark of Deuteronomy is also constructed from acacia wood. The fact that the type of wood used to build the Ark is specified in this terse account suggests that acacia wood was considered significant. In fact, according to the report in Exodus 25–27, acacia is the only type of wood used to construct the holy tabernacle and its furnishings.

Like Moses, Nergal also received specific instructions from a god for how to craft a piece of furniture. And like the Ark, Nergal's chair is also said to be formed from a particular kind of wood, *mēsu* wood, the "flesh of the gods." Nergal also took pains to craft a wooden chair and to adorn it lavishly, painting the furniture so that it gleamed like silver, gold, and lapis lazuli. Since both the Yhwh's Ark and Nergal's chair were

constructed with special materials according to divine blueprints, it is only fitting that they should serve as a locus for supernatural powers.

The Violent Conquest of Jericho and the Jordan

Presumably armed with thrones of sacred wood overlaid with gold, then, the heroes Nergal and Joshua dare to venture into hostile territory. When Joshua is first introduced in the book that bears his name, he is referred to as "Joshua son of Nun" (Josh 1:1). Elsewhere, too, Joshua is frequently called by this title. In fact, on twenty-six separate occasions in the Hebrew Bible, our hero is designated as "Joshua son of Nun." Interestingly, the god Nergal is also commonly known as "Nergal son of Enlil." At the very beginning of the Neo-Assyrian version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, when the god Ea is giving Nergal instructions on how he should build the chair and conduct himself in the Netherworld, Ea twice refers to Nergal as "my son." This should probably be regarded as a term of endearment rather than a literal statement of kinship, since elsewhere Nergal is known to be Enlil's son. Yet highlighting Nergal's status as son may be significant here. We might imagine that calling someone "son" is potentially belittling, but in fact, in this context it may be just the opposite. Assyriologists suggest that Nergal's designation as "son," which emphasizes his youth, simultaneously serves to emphasize his prowess as a warrior: "As son of Enlil, Nergal is also described as a young god: šul, a concept tightly connected with the one of hero and his martial qualities."[159] In hymns and prayers, Nergal is consistently praised as the strongest of the gods. The biblical designation of Joshua as

[159] Ponchia and Luukko, xvi n 16. See also Egbert von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal*, AOAT 11 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1971), 16ff.

"son of Nun" may similarly highlight the youthful valor of this hero as Israel's preeminent warrior figure, the one who leads the conquest of Canaan.

In Joshua 3–4, the Israelites are preparing to launch a military campaign to invade the land of Canaan. But in order to access the Promised Land, they must first cross the Jordan River, whose waters at the time were treacherously high, overflowing their banks (Josh 3:15). The river thus represents a formidable border, but Yhwh assures Joshua he will perform a miracle there, cutting off the flowing waters of the Jordan to show his own divine strength and prove Joshua's worthiness as successor to Moses. Yhwh's speech to Joshua makes explicit the legitimating function of this miracle: "Yhwh said to Joshua, 'On this day I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, because they will see that, just as I was with Moses, so I am with you. For you are the one who will command the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant" (Josh 3:7–8a). It is specifically by means of crossing boundaries, then, that Joshua is exalted as ruler of Israel.

The importance of the border-crossing theme is attested by the frequent use of the verb עבר, "to cross," which occurs fifty-eight times in the book of Joshua. We have noted that Nergal also achieves glory in the myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* by crossing the cosmic borders of the Netherworld at will. In the poem of *Erra and Ishum* as well, Erra (another name for Nergal) is expressly lauded for his abilities as a "crosser": *kī Šamši* ***abari*** *kippata kalāma*, "like Shamash I cross through all perimeters."[160] This self-praise alludes to the sun god's capacity to cross into the Netherworld; as the god of justice, Shamash goes everywhere and sees everything.

[160] Luigi Cagni, *L'epopea di Erra*, Studi Semitici 34 (Rome: Istituto di studi del Vicino Oriente dell'Università, 1969), 71: I, 116. The English translation here is my own. Cagni's Italian translation reads: "come Šamaš io scandaglio l'interna orbita (del mondo)."

In Joshua 3–4, the centerpiece of the miraculous crossing of the Jordan is Yhwh's Ark: the priests are to carry the Ark into the river, and as soon as their feet touch the waters, the flowing streams would be cut off, allowing the Israelites to cross the boundary of the Promised Land without getting wet. The crossing of the Jordan not only reenacts the crossing of the Reed Sea/Red Sea under Moses; it also participates in the biblical Chaoskampf tradition, in which Yhwh defeats watery chaos to establish his orderly kingdom.[161] Read in light of this mythological motif, the role of the Ark becomes more violent; it is like a knife that slices the living river in two.

The violent capacity of the Ark may be emphasized by the fact that the Levites are the ones pictured as carrying it here (Josh 3:3, and also later, in 8:33). The Levitical priests have a long history of violence within the biblical tradition.[162] Following the Golden Calf episode described in Exodus 32, for example, the Levites rally to Moses and carry out his command to kill the idolatrous Israelites: "Thus says Yhwh, God of Israel: Put your sword on your thigh, each one of you! Go back and forth (עברו ושׁובו) from gate to gate in the camp, and kill—each one of you!—brother, friend, and neighbor" (Exod 32:27). In the wake of slaughtering three thousand loved ones, the Levites are consecrated to Yhwh's service (Exod 32:29).

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[161] Bernard Batto believes that both the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan River were influenced by the Canaanite Combat Myth: "The parallelism between Prince Sea and Judge River as twin names for the chaos dragon in the Baal myth would have been highly suggestive in this context. Sea was historicized as the Red Sea, and River as the Jordan" (*Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in Biblical Tradition* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992], 143).

[162] For more on the violence of the Levites in Jewish tradition, see the recent Harvard dissertation by Yonatan S. Miller, "Sacred Slaughter: The Discourse of Priestly Violence as Refracted through the Zeal of Phinehas in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Literature" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015). Another recent treatment of the subject is that of Joel S. Baden, "The Violent Origins of the Levites: Text and Tradition," in *Levites and Priests in Biblical History and Tradition*, ed. Mark Leuchter and Jeremy M. Hutton (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011), 103–16.

In the book of Genesis, the eponymous ancestor of the Levites, Levi son of Jacob, together with his brother Simeon, exact bloody vengeance from Shechem, who seduced their sister Dinah (Gen 34). Jacob disapproved of their violent retaliation, and on his deathbed he curses these two sons instead of blessing them:

> Simeon and Levi are brothers;
> their weapons are instruments of violence.
> May my spirit not enter their counsel;
> may my glory not join in their assembly.
> For in their anger they killed a man;
> they hamstrung an ox for pleasure.
> Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce;
> and their wrath, for it is unyielding.
> I will divide them in Jacob;
> I will scatter them in Israel. (Gen 49:5–7)

In later biblical tradition, the Levites are in fact scattered throughout Israel. They receive no land allotment, as do the other Israelite tribes following the conquest (Josh 13:14, 33). The reason for this is that the Levites are dedicated to the service of Yhwh as a substitute for the firstborn sons of Israel (Num 3:8; Deut 18:1). And so the descendants of the violent son of Jacob serve as a defensive force, protecting the firstborn sons in Israel from the violence of the deity. In their role as guardians of the tabernacle as well, the descendants of the wrathful Levi serve to protect the Israelites from the wrath of Yhwh. As we read in Num 1:53,

והלוים יחנו סביב למשכן העדת ולא־יהיה קצף על־עדת בני ישׂראל ושמרו הלוים את־משמרת משכן העדות׃

"The Levites shall encamp around the Tabernacle of the Covenant, so that wrath does not break out against the assembly of the Israelites. The Levites shall be in charge of guarding the Tabernacle of the Covenant" (Num 1:53).

Given the wrathful violence that springs forth from the Ark, particularly in the narratives of 1–2 Samuel, it is appropriate that the same protective troops that surrounded the Tabernacle of the Covenant were also assigned to handle the Ark of the Covenant. Divine wrath might lash out from either one of these holy objects.

In Joshua 3, the waters of the Jordan are repelled at the advent of Yhwh's Ark. Having camped out on the bank of the Jordan for three days, the Israelites are exhorted to prepare themselves for the miraculous crossing. The officials tell the Israelites that they must wait for the Ark to lead them, "for you have never crossed over this way before" (כי לֹא עברתם בדרך מתמול שׁלשׁום, Josh 3:4). This statement highlights the unprecedented nature of the impending procession. As Nergal returned from the Land of No Return in the Mesopotamian myth, the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan is a highly unusual event. The people are also ordered to maintain a safe following distance of about two thousand cubits between them and the Ark. This warning serves to remind the Israelites of the dangerous nature of the Ark.

Joshua then commands the Levites: שׂאו את־ארון הברית ועברו לפני העם, "Lift up the Ark of the Covenant, and cross over in front of the people" (Josh 3:6). We noted that Moses had ordered the Levites to take violent action by saying, "Go back and forth…" (literally, "Cross over and return," עברו ושׁובו, Exod 32:27). As the new Israelite leader, Joshua commands the Levites using the same verb as Moses did, עבר, which serves as a *Leitwort* throughout the book of Joshua. On this occasion, however, the Levites do not draw swords to cut the bodies of their loved ones; rather, as a result of their crossing, a body of water is cut off. As soon as the feet of those carrying the Ark touch the water, the waters flowing from above stood up in a single heap, while those flowing towards the

Dead Sea "were completely cut off" (תמו נכרתו, Josh 3:16). That the Ark was regarded as a key figure in the miraculous crossing of the Jordan is highlighted in the short speech prescribed to commemorate the event in Josh 4:7. Joshua tells the Israelites that when their children inquire as to the meaning of the memorial stones set up by the river, they should explain:

נכרתו מימי הירדן מפני ארון ברית־יהוה בעברו בירדן נכרתו מי הירדן

"The waters of the Jordan were cut off before the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off" (Josh 4:7).

If there is implicit violence in the description of Yhwh's Ark cutting off the waters of the Jordan, the next episode of Joshua's conquest places the Ark squarely in the center of a bloody takeover. The first verse of Joshua 6 emphasizes that the city of Jericho, which the Israelites were besieging, was securely fortified: "Now Jericho was shut off and shut in against the Israelites; no one came out and no one went in" (Josh 6:1). Again faced with seemingly impenetrable boundaries, this time high walls instead of high waters, the God of Israel announces another breakthrough miracle. And again, Yhwh commands that the central position in the astonishing border crossing is to be occupied by the Ark, which travels in a procession behind seven priests blowing shofars in the midst of the armed troops.[163]

[163] Eun-Woo Lee notes that the movement of the Ark is frequently accompanied by music in Joshua 6 (vv. 4, 5, 8, 13, 16, 20). She believes this and other shared themes and linguistic features indicate that the stories of the Ark in Joshua are literarily dependent on the Ark Narrative as attested in 1–2 Samuel and Chronicles: "Joshua 6 uses the name of a musical instrument (שופר(ות, and 'war cry' (תרועה), both of which appear in 2 Sam 6:15//1 Chr 15:28" (Eun-Woo Lee, *Crossing the Jordan: Diachrony versus Synchrony in the Book of Joshua* [London: T&T Clark, 2013], 130). It is also noteworthy here that the infinitive absolute is used with the verb הלך "to walk/go" twice in Joshua 6 (vv. 9, 13): the priests are said to walk in front of the Ark, blowing their shofars as they go: הלוך ותקוע בשופרות. As we will discuss at length in chapter 5, this grammatical construction appears elsewhere in connection with the Ark as well. These verbs indicating movement and simultaneous action highlight the importance of processions in relation to the Ark.

The frequent use of the number seven highlights the supernatural character of the conquest led by Joshua. The number seven also figures prominently in the account of Nergal's conquest. Nergal escapes from Ereshkigal, accomplishing his first act of miraculous border crossing, on the seventh day; the Israelites likewise succeed in breaking through the walls of Jericho on the seventh day. Moreover, just as there are seven gates of the Netherworld that must be transgressed in order to enter and exit that kingdom, so too the Israelites had to circumscribe the borders of Jericho seven times to gain entry to the city. Seven priests march in front of the Ark blowing seven shofars (Josh 6:4). In fact, the number seven appears exactly fourteen times in Joshua 6. In the Amarna version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* as well, the number seven is also featured in the seven and seven (fourteen) demons that advance against the Netherworld gates alongside the warrior Nergal.

According to Joshua 6, the Ark advances and makes a single lap around the city on six consecutive days; on the seventh day, the Ark circles the city seven times. After the final lap, all the people shout, trumpets are blown, and lo and behold, the walls of Jericho miraculously collapse, allowing the Israelites to storm and take their first Canaanite city. We are also told that this is the first time the Israelites engage in the practice of חרם, killing all living things in the city and consigning them to Yhwh, with the exception of the prostitute Rahab and her family, since Rahab had assisted the Israelite spies when they took refuge in her house in the city wall.

Nergal and Ereshkigal; Joshua and Rahab

As we are in the process of comparing the account of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, which in its Neo-Assyrian rendition is essentially a love story, and the Israelite conquest of Canaan, it is interesting to note that later Jewish tradition transforms Joshua's conquest into a love story as well. In midrashic literature (*Sifre Num*., 78; *Zuta'*, 75), Joshua and Rahab get married after the Israelites destroy Jericho. As Joshua's wife, Rahab produces offspring, and according to these midrashim, she becomes the maternal ancestor of nine prophetic figures, including the prophetess Huldah.

That Rahab should be regarded as one capable of generating prophets is fitting, since her role in Joshua may be regarded as that of oracle to the spies. Francis Landy has pointed out that Joshua himself served as a spy under Moses; along with Caleb and their less intrepid comrades, Joshua is said to have scouted out the land of Canaan and brought back its wondrous fruit (Numbers 13–14). The initial spy mission was conducted for the purpose of answering specific questions regarding the territory of Canaan, as Moses outlines in Num 13:17–20. What kind of land was it? What were its inhabitants like? Does it have trees? And of course, as with most missions of this sort, the prospective invaders would be eager to identify any weak spots that they could exploit. In order to develop a successful military strategy, the attacking army requires knowledge of the foreign territory. But in Joshua 2, no such information is sought or acquired by the spies. Their commander Joshua simply tells the two men: "Go see the land, and Jericho" (Josh 2:1).

Wasting no time, the men head straight to a prostitute in the city. In Landy's view, the second reconnaissance mission is more symbolic than pragmatic: "Joshua, through his

alter-egos, the spies, goes to a prostitute, and spies out the land. Nothing is achieved in this chapter, at least on the practical level; whatever happens is psychological and symbolic."[164] Although the spies clearly endanger themselves by entering the gates of the enemy city, it is unclear what they are risking their lives to achieve. Unlike the first mission of the twelve spies, these two men bring back no prize produce or detailed information. Rather, when they return to Joshua, the spies merely report what Rahab has revealed to them: that the residents of Jericho are afraid of the Israelites. The spies also echo what Rahab foretold: "Truly Yhwh will deliver the entire land into our hand" (Josh 2:24). What the spies bring back, then, is Rahab's prophecy.

Practically speaking, however, this prophecy hardly justifies the dangerous mission. After all, Yhwh had already communicated the same message to Joshua (Josh 1:1–6). On a literary level, we might observe that the successful voyage of the Israelite spies into and out of Jericho foreshadows the successful conquest of Canaan. On the plane of the story's action, we might say that the mission of the spies serves a similar legitimating function as the other border-crossing miracles that are about to occur. It signals that the Israelite conquest of Canaan is divinely ordained.

Indeed, the themes of border crossing and escape, which are so prevalent in *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, are also prominent in the Joshua spy story. Both tales recount two distinct trips by foreign males to the abode of a sexually available native female. In the second chapter of Joshua, two Israelite spies enter Jericho and stay at the prostitute Rahab's house. The king of Jericho commands Rahab to give up her guests, since they

[164] Francis Landy, "Rahab, Conquistadores, and Masquerades" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, GA, November 2015), 2.

are enemy spies. But Rahab tells the king that the men had already departed from the city. She claims ignorance: she did not know where they came from, and she does not know where they went. Nevertheless, she exhorts the king to pursue the spies at once: "Hurry up and chase them! You'll surely overtake them!" (Josh 2:5). Of course, Rahab is lying. Having sent the king on a wild goose chase, Rahab returns to the men hidden in a pile of flax on her roof. She tells them she knows what lies ahead: their army will overtake her city, for "Truly Yhwh your god is god in heaven above and on earth below" (Josh 2:11). She makes the men promise to spare her life when they return to conquer the city. After the spies swear to protect her household, Rahab facilitates their escape. The text explicitly states that the city gate had already been closed (והשׁער סגרו, Josh 2:7), and so the residents of Jericho would have every reason to believe that no one would be able to escape the heavily fortified city. And yet there is a loophole for the Israelites; they escape through the wall itself! Since Rahab's house is built into the city wall, she lets them down by a rope through her window (ותורדם בחבל בעד החלון).[165] What by all appearances is an impenetrable border thus becomes a door through which the Israelites pass quite easily. Here too, the walls of Jericho cooperate with Yhwh's will. When the spies return to Rahab's city a second time, this time breaking in through the city walls instead of breaking out through them, they do in fact keep their promise to the prostitute. Whereas all other living beings are put to the sword when the walls collapse, the army is careful to

[165] The duplicity of Rahab here prefigures the Michal's cunning ploy to save her husband David in 1 Sam 19:11–17. When her father, King Saul, attempts to kill the rising military hero, Michal helps David escape through her window: ותרד מיכל את־דוד בעד החלון ויילך ויברח וימלט, "Michal let David down through the window, and he fled and escaped" (1 Sam 19:12). As a ruse, Michal dresses up a household idol as her husband and says that David is sick in bed. When Saul's henchmen discover her trick, Michal lies and claims to have acted under duress.

spare the household marked with a crimson cord—that is, the house of Rahab and her family.

Nergal likewise visits the Netherworld twice in the Neo-Assyrian tale. On the first occasion his life is endangered, but even though Ereshkigal might have killed him, she seduces and spares the foreign male. Unlike Rahab, who orchestrates the escape of the Israelite spies from her city, Queen Ereshkigal only lets Nergal get away unwillingly. On his second trip to the Netherworld, the balance of power shifts. Nergal aggressively breaks through the gates and seizes Ereshkigal by her hair, thereby demonstrating his dominance over the native female and her kingdom. Thus, in both the biblical and Neo-Assyrian accounts, the males' lives are threatened on their first trip to the hostile region overseen by a female; on the second trip, the female is endangered, but the violent males spare her life when taking over her territory. By the act of breaking into and out of her fortified city at will, the invading male god demonstrates his dominance. When the Israelites conquer Jericho, Yhwh proves himself to be God of heaven above and earth below, as Rahab had acknowledged. Nergal likewise shows his strength in the upper realm of heaven and the Netherworld below by crossing cosmic borders to overcome Ereshkigal.

If, following Landy, we see the Israelite spies as embodiments of Joshua, then the parallel between *Nergal and Ereshkigal* and the biblical conquest account becomes more salient. That is, if we imagine the warrior Joshua staying with, and perhaps sleeping with, the native Rahab, whom he ends up marrying according to later Jewish tradition, then the plotline of this conquest-turned-romance corresponds quite nicely to that of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. Rahab and Joshua are both distinctly liminal figures in their respective

societies, though in very different ways. As Landy poignantly observes, "Joshua straddles the two worlds, as a survivor of the wilderness generation, responsible for crossing and recrossing, himself on one side, the spies on the other, of the Jordan, a river dividing life from death, past from future."[166] Joshua's liminal characteristics are praiseworthy and contribute to his glory. He straddles with great valor, heroically leading his people from one side to the other, from danger to safety, from a hostile wilderness to a stable home. By contrast, the liminality of the female figure in this story invites her people's scorn.[167] Again, Landy notes, "But prostitutes, as liminal people—e.g., Rahab's position on the city wall—are associated with treachery, social exclusion, denigration, and idealization."[168] Certainly Rahab's neighbors in Jericho would have had every right to despise her, had they known of her deal with the Israelites. In Rahab's defense, however, we might note that catching or killing the spies would likely have done little to stave off the impending attack. One of the liminal roles cast by the author of Joshua may involve more glory than the other; nevertheless, as male and female counterparts in this border-crossing tale, Joshua and Rahab make a fitting pair.

The Possibility of Literary Influence

Although it is not my objective to argue that the author of Joshua is alluding specifically to the myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, I would like to point out that the two literary works

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[166] Landy, "Rahab, Conquistadores, and Masquerades," 3.

[167] Phyllis Bird argues that the marginality of the prostitute is essential to Rahab's literary characterization in Joshua 2 (Phyllis Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presumption in Three Old Testament Texts," *Semeia* 46 [1989]: 119–39).

[168] Landy, "Rahab, Conquistadores, and Masquerades," 3.

appear to be products of the same time period, the seventh century BCE. (As we might expect, there is scholarly disagreement with regard to the dating of both texts. But most Assyriologists date the Sultantepe manuscript of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* to the seventh or eighth century, and the composition of Joshua's conquest account is traditionally thought to have been begun in the seventh century as well.[169])

Moreover, Thomas Römer has recently observed that the conquest accounts of Joshua 6–12 share much in common Neo-Assyrian military propaganda. Römer identifies six common features of Assyrian conquest accounts and notes that all of these are employed in the book of Joshua as well. He concludes that "These parallels suggest that the conquest accounts in the book of Joshua were directly influenced by the genre and ideology of Neo-Assyrian warfare accounts … it is no surprise that the royal scribes in Jerusalem knew of the Neo-Assyrian documents, and chose to imitate them in their attempt to create a literature of conquest legitimating Judah's national autonomy, for the Assyrians had developed remarkable propaganda strategies."[170] If this is the case, then we might surmise that the author of Joshua was also familiar with the Neo-Assyrian myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* and may have chosen to exploit its legitimating rhetoric in crafting a specifically Israelite conquest account replete with miraculous border-crossing and intrigue.

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[169] Scholars who have supported a seventh-century date for an early version of the Joshua conquest accounts include, e.g., Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*; Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History*, 86–90. For a fuller discussion of scholarly debates with regard to the dating of Joshua, see Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

[170] Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History*, 84–86.

The similarities I have outlined here between Joshua's conquest narrative and the Mesopotamian myth may not support direct literary influence, but they do suggest that the two tales are drawing on a common cultural heritage and employing shared literary motifs. I have focused here on the motif of the divine chair, arguing that the function of Nergal's chair in the Neo-Assyrian version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal* corresponds to that of the fourteen demons described in the Amarna version: both are given to Nergal by Ea before he undertakes his voyage into hostile territory; the demons and the chair both possess supernatural powers; and they assist Nergal in the same way—that is, they allow him to break through the fortified gates of the Netherworld and to violently take over new territory. I have observed that the Ark of Yhwh plays a remarkably similar role in the conquest accounts of Joshua, particularly in Joshua 3–4 and 6.

A Throne at the Gates: Making Way for the Divine Warrior

The motif of Yhwh's throne breaking through barriers may not be limited to the book of Joshua. In many poetic texts that describe the procession of the divine warrior, we also see inanimate objects voluntarily yielding to clear a path before Yhwh. Some of these texts appear to imagine the divine presence as manifest in the Ark, or throne, of Yhwh. Other poems present the warring deity shattering obstacles with the help of fearsome—and possibly demonic—troops.

Nergal is not the only conquering god who employs plagues and demons in his service. The Hebrew Bible also portrays a divine warrior with a retinue of fierce supernatural beings. In Psalm 78, for example, Yhwh's conquest of the Egyptians is brought about with the help of terrifying agents:

יִשְׁלַח־בָּם חֲרוֹן אַפּוֹ עֶבְרָה וָזַעַם וְצָרָה מִשְׁלַחַת מַלְאֲכֵי רָעִים: יְפַלֵּס נָתִיב לְאַפּוֹ לֹא־חָשַׂךְ מִמָּוֶת נַפְשָׁם וְחַיָּתָם
לַדֶּבֶר הִסְגִּיר: וַיַּךְ כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּמִצְרָיִם רֵאשִׁית אוֹנִים בְּאָהֳלֵי־חָם:

He dispatched his burning anger against them:
wrath and outrage and distress,
an envoy of evil angels.
He cleared a path for his anger;
he did not keep them from death
but consigned their lives to pestilence.
He struck down every firstborn in Egypt,
the first fruits of their strength in the tents of Ham. (Ps 78:49–51)

Having first "cleared a path," Yhwh sends forth "an envoy of evil angels" to plague his enemies. The designation "evil angel" also recalls the Passover narrative in Exodus 12, where another violent character, "the Destroyer" (המשחית), is dispatched by Yhwh to slay all firstborn sons in the land (Exod 12:23).[171] The biblical exodus account is also alluded to in both the Ark Narrative and the conquest narratives of Joshua; the Philistines in particular are terrified by the plagues that Yhwh inflicted upon the Egyptians (1 Sam 4:8). Whereas in Psalm 78 and Exodus 12 death is doled out by menacing characters, in these Deuteronomistic narratives violence is spread through a cultic object, the Ark.

In Habakkuk 3, Dever and Resheph, "pestilence and plague," are presented as weapons in the arsenal of the divine warrior Yhwh: "Pestilence (דבר) goes before him, and plague (רשף) comes out at his feet" (Hab 3:5). This verse is remarkably similar to a Neo-Assyrian text that exhorts King Shalmaneser III (859–824 BCE) to battle: "Let the

[171] In the "Destroyer" entry of DDD, S. A. Meier notes that the indiscriminate nature of the Destroyer's slaughter is characteristic of ancient Near Eastern plague gods. He compares the violence of the Exodus Destroyer with the bloody rampage of Erra/Nergal in the Erra Epic: "It is a feature of these deities that they do not discriminate between the innocent and the guilty, and that extreme measures are required to stop them before complete annihilation occurs… There can be little question, therefore, that the Destroyer in Exod 12:23 belongs to the class of plague deities broadly attested in the ancient Near East" (S. A. Meier, "Destroyer," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* [DDD], ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, 2nd rev. ed. [Leiden: Brill, 1999], 457–58).

god Nergal (^{d}MAŠ.MAŠ) march before you (*ina pānīka lillik*), let the god Girra [*come behind*].”[172] Resheph is one of the most popular Northwest Semitic deities worshiped in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt (as Rashpu or Rasap). His name means “fiery, burning one, plague,” and he spreads disease through his bow and arrow. It is especially interesting for our discussion that Resheph is equated with Nergal in Ugaritic ritual texts and at Emar.[173] As in Psalm 78, here too a path is cleared for the onslaught of the divine warrior. Yhwh’s demonic retinue—which includes a figure closely associated with Nergal—negates the natural boundaries that would obstruct the progress of any other army. At their approach, “the venerable mountains (הררי־עד) shattered; along his eternal path, the ancient hills (גבעות עולם) lay low” (Hab 3:6). Such a leveling capacity is also assigned to Nergal in an Assyrian prayer preserved in the library at Nineveh, where he is praised as “Hero who levels the enemy land.”[174]

Whereas ancient hills and mountains make way for Yhwh in Habakkuk 3 and elsewhere, in Psalm 24, ancient gates are called upon to clear a path for the divine warrior. Most commentators interpret this text, especially verses 7–10, as a liturgical song accompanying the ritual procession of Yhwh’s Ark to the Temple:

שׂאו שׁערים ראשׁיכם והנשׂאו פתחי עולם ויבוא מלך הכבוד׃
מי זה מלך הכבוד יהוה עזוז וגבור יהוה גבור מלחמה׃
שׂאו שׁערים ראשׁיכם ושׂאו פתחי עולם ויבא מלך הכבוד׃
מי הוא זה מלך הכבוד יהוה צבאות הוא מלך הכבוד סלה

[172] Ponchia and Luukko, xliv. The text is A.0.102.17.

[173] The name Resheph occurs several other times in the Hebrew Bible: Deut 32:24, Hab 3:5, Song 8:6, Job 5:7, Pss 76:4, 78:48. For more on the worship of Nergal/Resheph, see Edward Lipiński, *Resheph: A Syro-Canaanite Deity* (Leuven: Peeters, 2009).

[174] Ibid., lxv.

> Lift up, O Gates, your heads! Be lifted up, O Ancient Doors!
> So that the King of Glory may enter.
> Who is the King of Glory? Yhwh strong and mighty, Yhwh mighty in battle.
>
> Lift up, O Gates, your heads! Be lifted up, O Ancient Doors!
> So that the King of Glory may enter.
> Who is this King of Glory? Yhwh of Armies, he is the King of Glory.
> Selah

Frank Moore Cross asserts that "The portion of the psalm in vv. 7–10 had its origin in the procession of the Ark to the sanctuary at its founding … On this there can be little disagreement."[175] If this song really does refer to the Ark, envisioned as Yhwh's royal throne, then here again we have an image of a divine warrior with a throne standing before venerable gates. Cross and other scholars have presumed these to be the gates of the Temple, a sensible presumption, considering the mention of the "mountain of Yhwh" (הר־יהוה) and "his holy place" (מקום קדשׁו) in verse 3. It is also possible that the gates are meant to refer to the city gates of Jerusalem.

If the gates addressed here are to be seen as corresponding to those of an actual city or temple, however, it seems implausible that they would be able to lift up their heads in a direct metaphorical sense. That is, since "ancient Palestinian gates had no parts

[175] Frank Moore Cross, Jr., *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 93. Some scholars have challenged Cross's confident assertion. After all, the Ark itself is not even mentioned in this psalm, as one of Cross's most accomplished pupils, Jon D. Levenson, has pointed out to me. In his article, "Ritual Procession of the Ark and Psalm 132" (*CBQ* 30 [1968]: 48–55), Delbert Hillers also objects to the view that Pss 24 and 132 describe a ritual reenactment of the procession of the Ark to the Temple. He concludes that we need not "rule out the possibility that Ps 132 was recited or sung at some point or points in the temple liturgy," but he believes it is "unnecessary to assume that the psalm was associated with any regularly recurring festival" (55).

that moved up and down,"[176] it would seem that this metaphor must be taken more abstractly. Cross suggests that telling the gates to lift their heads is a call for them to rejoice at the return of the divine warrior.[177] It could also be the case that gates lifting up their heads would have constituted a miraculous occurrence. Perhaps the gates were not imagined as opening in a physically normal way at all, but rather transformed and yielded unnaturally in response to the throne of Yhwh.[178]

Such an understanding would match the reaction of other inanimate entities to Yhwh in texts describing the procession of the deity. Just as the gates are ordered to perform a seemingly impossible task in Psalm 24, so too in Isaiah 40, "a voice calls out" and commands mountains to flatten themselves and valleys to rise up in order to make a smooth path for the deity to tread. As a result of this radical reshaping of the natural landscape, "the glory of Yhwh will be revealed" (Isa 40:5). Deep valleys and high mountains represent obstacles for all other travelers, but these natural boundaries miraculously disappear, morphing into a highway, when the God of Israel approaches.[179]

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[176] J. J. M. Roberts, "The King of Glory," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 104–5.

[177] Here Cross cites a parallel in Ugaritic literature where the gods who had hung their heads in despair when threatened by Yamm are commanded by Baal to lift up their heads and rejoice, since Baal would confront their foe and return victorious (*Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 98–99).

[178] Another possibility is that these entities were actually regarded as living objects in some sense as well. At the beginning of the Neo-Assyrian version of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, for example, it seems the gates themselves are imagined as blessing those who pass through them. In their commentary on line 24, Ponchia and Luukko note: "We may have to consider the gate a divine being here when it, as the subject of the clause, blesses the enterer" (36).

[179] Malachi 3 also describes a harbinger of Yhwh, "the messenger of the Covenant" (v. 1), who clears a path in front of the terrifying deity so that Yhwh of Hosts can enter the temple. The final verses of the book of Malachi seem to indicate that this messenger was identified as Elijah in later traditions. Special thanks to Jeffrey Stackert for suggesting the possible relevance of Isaiah 40 and Malachi 3 to my discussion.

We have observed a recurring motif in biblical narrative and poetry, one in which inanimate entities yield to clear a path for the warrior Yhwh. Natural boundaries such as mountains, hills, valleys, and rivers transform unnaturally. Manmade boundaries, too, such as walls and gates, crumble or raise themselves up in response to Yhwh's approach. Whether Yhwh is imagined as marching with a demonic host or whether his destructive powers animate his divine throne, Yhwh's glory is revealed when these borders collapse.

The Mesopotamian myth that recounts Nergal's mission to the Netherworld likewise describes the god advancing in two different manners: in the older Amarna account, Nergal is accompanied by fearsome demons that allow him to break through the Netherworld gates and conquer Ereshkigal; in the Neo-Assyrian version, these border-crossing powers appear to be located in the chair that he carries to the Netherworld and back.

The divine thrones appear to serve our heroes well in the Neo-Assyrian *Nergal and Ereshkigal* and in the conquest accounts of Joshua. The Ark is instrumental in the crossing of the Jordan and the collapse of the walls of Jericho, and it is by means of these miraculous breakthroughs that Joshua's leadership credentials and divine sponsorship are confirmed. I have argued that Nergal's chair functions in a similar way in the Neo-Assyrian myth. Ea commands Nergal to build a special chair that allows him to escape the realm of death and to return there as victor on his own terms. His mastery of border crossing in a supposedly impenetrable domain legitimates his right to rule the Netherworld jointly with Ereshkigal.

The myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, where Nergal's chair appears to play a significant role, provides scant details concerning this piece of furniture, and the chair

makes no further appearances in other Mesopotamian tales. The throne of Yhwh, on the other hand, is featured prominently in the early history of the Israelite people as presented in 1–2 Samuel. But as we will see in our discussion of the Ark Narrative, the destructive energy of Yhwh's Ark does not always work to the Israelites' advantage.

CHAPTER 3

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YHWH AND THE ARK IN 1–2 SAMUEL

The text that will occupy most of our attention here and in subsequent chapters is the so-called "Ark Narrative," the stories featuring the Ark of the Covenant in 1–2 Samuel (especially 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6). In the present chapter, I discuss the extent of the Ark Narrative and offer a new translation of 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6. I then take a close look at the relationship between Yhwh and the Ark as presented in 1–2 Samuel and discuss whether it is most accurate to speak of the Ark as if it were Yhwh himself, a body of the deity, a divine image or symbol, or something else entirely.

The So-Called "Ark Narrative": Terminology and Extent

Modern scholarship on the narratives featuring the Ark in 1–2 Samuel has been consistently—and often tediously—preoccupied with defining the limits of the pericope.[180] Given their concern with establishing the boundaries of the text, it is no wonder that biblical scholars regularly cite the first chapter of Leonhard Rost's book, *The Succession to the Throne of David* (1926), as a touchstone for their discussion.[181] In this short chapter, titled "The Ark Narrative," Rost argues that the texts featuring the Ark in 1

[180] But as Keith Bodner points out, more recent scholarship on the Ark Narrative is beginning to move away from the source-critical approach: "the virtual consensus generated by Rost has come under intense scrutiny in the past two decades, and many scholars are now more interested in literary questions surrounding the final form and exilic *chronotope*" (Keith Bodner, "Ark-Eology: Shifting Emphases in 'Ark Narrative' Scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research* 4 [2006]: 169–97, at 193).

[181] Rost's book was originally published in German as *Die Überlieferung von der Thronnachfolge Davids* by Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, in 1926. Here I will cite from the English translation of the work: Leonhard Rost, *The Succession to the Throne of David*, trans. Michael D. Rutter and David M. Gunn (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982).

Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 constitute a self-contained early history of the Ark that was originally unconnected to the biblical texts in which it is now embedded. Rost points out that the prophet Samuel, the main character of the narratives that immediately precede and follow 1 Samuel 4–6, is not mentioned at all in these chapters. He also identifies common vocabulary, themes, and stylistic features between the two blocks of text. Rost argues that the settling of the Ark in Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6 represents an appropriate conclusion to the accounts of the wandering Ark outlined in 1 Samuel 4–6. Moreover, he hypothesizes that the Ark Narrative was composed by one of the priests who tended to the Ark in the Jerusalem Temple, and that the text served as an etiology, or *hieros logos*, for the Ark as a cultic object.[182]

Rost's suggestion that the narratives of 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 should be read together as two parts of the same story[183] may not seem especially radical. After all, both narratives deal with the Ark as a dangerous but desirable holy object. It is obvious that both treat similar themes; furthermore, the two pericopes use similar language to describe the Ark and its activities. Most striking is the name, "The Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh of Hosts, who is seated upon the cherubim," ארון ברית־יהוה צבאות יֹשֵׁב הכרבים (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2), which in its full form is applied to the Ark only in these two tales.[184]

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[182] Ibid., 26.

[183] To be more precise, we should delimit the text as 1 Sam 4:1b–7:2 instead of 1 Sam 4–6, but I have chosen to use the latter throughout for the sake of simplicity. To be even more precise, Rost believes the entire Ark Narrative consists of the following verses: 1 Sam 4:1b–18a, 19–21; 5:1–11b, 12; 6:1–3b, 4, 10–14, 16; 6:19–7:1; and 2 Sam 6:1–15, 17–20a (Rost, *Succession*, 13). That is to say, Rost holds that certain verses that currently appear within 1 Sam 4:1b–7:2 and 2 Samuel 6 did not properly belong to the original story but were added at a later date for various reasons.

[184] In 2 Sam 6:2, this name for the Ark is embedded within a relative clause:

What made Rost's idea revolutionary is that the prominent biblical scholars of his time had been advocating a very different perspective. Julius Wellhausen had previously developed a strong case for chapters 4–6 as a discrete literary unit in 1 Samuel, invoking some of the same reasons that Rost would take up (such as the fact that Samuel is absent from these chapters). But Wellhausen, like most other biblical scholars at the time (e.g., Löhr and Nowack[185]), held that 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 stem from two separate sources and thus should not be treated together as a literary unit.[186] In the view of these scholars, 1 Samuel 4–6 represents an early history of the Ark, whereas the narrative in 2 Samuel 6 belongs to the story of David's kingship. Their theory is based primarily on a few textual discrepancies between the two accounts: First, according to 1 Sam 7:1, the Ark is placed in Kiriath-jearim, inside the house of Abinadab, which was on a hill. We are told that Abinadab's son Eleazar was consecrated as caretaker of the Ark at that time. In 2 Sam 6:3, on the other hand, the Ark is also located in the house of Abinadab on the hill, but this house is said to be in Baale-judah. Second, the sons of Abinadab who tend to the Ark are named in 2 Samuel 6 as Uzzah and Ahio, and not Eleazar as in 1 Samuel 7.

ארון האלהים אשר־נקרא שם שם יהוה צבאות ישב הכרבים עליו

This is slightly different from the way it appears in 1 Sam 4:4. This name also appears in the parallel account of the Ark's transfer to Jerusalem in 1 Chron 13:6.

[185] Max Löhr, rev., O. Thenius, *Die Bücher Samuelis*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1898); Wilhelm Nowack, *Richter, Ruth und Bücher Samuelis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1902).

[186] See Wellhausen's remarks in Friedrich Bleek's *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, rev. Julius Wellhausen, 4th ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1878), 208ff and 222ff. Other scholars of the time held that 1 Samuel 4–6 could be assigned to E, and 2 Samuel 6, to J; see, e.g., Karl Budde, *Die Bücher Samuel*, KHCAT 8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1902), 33.

But Rost dismisses these discrepancies, concurring with the assessment of scholars who surmise that Baale-judah is another name for Kiriath-jearim[187] and that, considering the substantial time difference between the two narratives, the "sons" of Abinadab named in 2 Samuel (Uzzah and Ahio) may have actually been his grandsons (i.e., the sons of Abinadab's son Eleazar).[188] Even if the discrepancies may not be accounted for by this logic, however, Rost does not consider them to be sufficient evidence to support the claim that the two accounts originated from separate sources. Nor is he convinced that 2 Samuel 6 is integral to the story of David's rise to kingship. Rather, Rost believes that this narrative, which describes the settling of the Ark in Jerusalem, provides a satisfying and logical conclusion to the account of the Ark's circumambulation after it departs from Shiloh in 1 Samuel 4–6. Rost is not the first scholar to suggest that these narratives may have constituted a unified and independent

[187] Pointing to Josh 15:9, which lists Kiriath-jearim as another name for a town called Baalah in Judah (Josh 15:60 and 18:14 make similar remarks), Rudolf Kittel concludes that these two names for the town should be regarded as interchangeable (see his notes in Emil Kautzsch's *Die Heilige Schrift des Alten Testaments*, ed. A. Bertholet, 4th ed., 2 vols. [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1922], 1:460 notes b and c). Antony Campbell suggests another interpretation that eliminates the discrepancy between the two chapters. He believes מבעלי יהודה should be rendered "from the citizens of Judah" (i.e., *baale* is taken as a masculine plural common noun in the construct state, with a partitive min). In this understanding, Baale-Judah need not refer to a place name at all. Campbell notes that this is how the phrase is understood in the LXX, Vulgate, Targum, and Syriac (Antony F. Campbell, "Yahweh and the Ark: A Case Study in Narrative," *JBL* 98 [1979]: 31–43, at 40).

[188] As Rost notes, this is the solution offered by Carl Friedrich Keil, *Die Bücher Samuels*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Dörffling und Franke, 1875), 260. Other scholars have suggested that Uzzah and Eleazar may be two names for the same man. As A. Graeme Auld points out, "The name of the unfortunate Uzzah (*ʿzh*) does share key consonants with Eleazar (*ʾlʿzr*) in this verse (and we may usefully recall a later king of Judah named both Azariah and Uzziah)" (A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel*, OTL [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011], 83). Auld also points out here that the names of the ones leading the Ark here could be understood as "Uzzah and his brother" (since it would be possible to point the consonants of the proper name אֲחִיוֹ, "Ahio" as אָחִיו, "his brother"). Perhaps the name of Uzzah's brother was Eleazar.

early history of the Ark[189]; but he is the first to have made a strong and substantial case for this view against others.

Rost concludes not only that 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 should be interpreted together, but that they constitute an originally self-contained history that underwent fragmentation in the course of textual transmission. As critics have since pointed out, however, Rost does not provide adequate evidence to support this hypothesis in his essay. He describes the style of these passages in an evocative manner, but Rost fails to demonstrate that these stylistic features are unique to 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6. He supports his claim of distinctive vocabulary in this corpus with an appendix that lists words used in these passages, including references to where the words appear elsewhere in Samuel and in the Hebrew Bible. It is often unclear why he chooses to list the words he does, however; in many cases, it is not evident that the word appears more frequently here than elsewhere in Samuel. And of course, for words that do show such a distribution, it could be argued that the choice of vocabulary is dictated by the subject matter. Rost's presentation of the supposedly distinctive vocabulary of 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 is thus hardly compelling. For these reasons, some of his critics have charged that Rost "confuses literary unity with unity of content."[190] And yet Rost's hypothesis has remained influential, even iconic, in the field.

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[189] Rost mentions that other contemporary biblical scholars—such as Steuernagel and Gressmann—had suggested that these chapters might derive from a single source. Gressmann, however, believes that large sections of these chapters must be later additions (Rost, *Succession*, 7; Carl Steuernagel, *Lehrbuch der Einleitung in das Alte Testament* [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1912]; Hugo Gressmann, *Die älteste Geschichtsschreibung und Prophetie Israels*, Die Schriften des Alten Testaments 2 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910]).

[190] See the introductory remarks by E. Ball in Rost's *Succession*, especially p. xvi.

As one scholar has recently pointed out, "No publication treating the Ark Narrative begins without a reference to the 1926 Erlangen dissertation of Rost, who identifies the Ark Narrative (1 Sam 4.1b–7.1; 2 Sam 6:1–20) as a separate story, the so-called *Ladeerzählung*."[191] And in fact, most modern scholars who have dealt with the Ark Narrative make it a point to orient their views according to those of Rost. To take just two examples, Antony F. Campbell declares his essential agreement with the work of Rost and moreover states that Rost "went far beyond his predecessors, and his successors have not gone very far beyond him."[192] Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, on the other hand, whose important book *The Hand of the Lord* will be discussed at length below, sharply disagree with Rost. And yet, despite their insistence that 2 Samuel 6 should not be considered part of the Ark Narrative proper, Miller and Roberts nonetheless imagine that "the author of 2 Sam 6 had the earlier narrative of 1 Sam 4–7 before him, and his shaping of the later material, particularly the incident of the death of Uzzah, has been influenced by the theology of the earlier ark narrative."[193] In this sense, Miller and Roberts do regard the two narratives as related. As they succinctly conclude, "It is clear that 2 Sam 6 resumes the story of the ark, but that does not prove that these chs. were originally a single unit."[194] They therefore refuse to include 2 Samuel 6 in what they call

[191] E. M. M. Eynikel, "The Relation between the Eli Narratives [1 Sam 1–4] and the Ark Narrative [1 Sam 1–6; 2 Sam 6:1–19]," in *Past, Present, and Future: The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets*, ed. J. C. de Moor and H. F. van Rooy, OTS 44 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 88–106, at 88.

[192] Antony F. Campbell, *The Ark Narrative, 1 Sam 4–6, 2 Sam 6: A Form-Critical and Traditio-Historical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1975), 12.

[193] Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel*, JHNES (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 24.

[194] Ibid.

"the Ark Narrative." Instead, Miller and Roberts argue that the earlier chapters of 1 Samuel should be considered integral to the story of the Ark as told in 1 Samuel 4–6. Even though Samuel is not mentioned in 1 Samuel 4–6, Miller and Roberts observe that the sons of Eli, who are indicted for their cultic sins in 1 Samuel 2, do play a significant role in 1 Samuel 4. We will assess the theological implications of these textual divisions in the following chapter.

Depending on whether or not they agree with Rost, scholars who refer to "the Ark Narrative" may mean different things. Those who accept Rost's hypothesis generally view the Ark Narrative as including both 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6, whereas those who reject his hypothesis generally regard the Ark Narrative as consisting of 1 Samuel 4–6 exclusively. In the present work, I do not attempt to answer the question of whether the Ark Narrative may have originally stood as an independent literary work. I believe it makes sense to treat 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 together on the basis of their shared themes. In particular, I support Rost's contention that 2 Samuel 6 offers a satisfying conclusion to the story as told in 1 Samuel 4–6. Thus, when I refer to the "Ark Narrative," I have in mind the narratives featuring the Ark in both 1 and 2 Samuel.

In his study of the Ark Narrative, Rost makes a number of other interesting observations unrelated to his hypothesis that 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 formed a complete and independent early history of the Ark. For example, he comments that the speeches recorded in the narrative are very short and "consist almost exclusively of questions."[195] Furthermore, he notes, "it is almost exclusively fear and horror that are revealed in these speeches. The author glosses over joyful events and happy moods

[195] Rost, *Succession*, 15.

without giving the participants anything to say. … This is … because he intends, wishes, to create a dark, sinister atmosphere over the whole narrative."[196] Such observations have been all but forgotten by later interpreters, who regard the source-critical argument as Rost's primary contribution. In what follows, my own discussion of the Ark Narrative will focus less on defining textual boundaries and more on the other issues that Rost addresses, which are concerned with the emotional and theological underpinnings of the text.

Translation of the Ark Narrative (1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6)

Let us now turn our attention to the biblical texts under consideration. Below I offer a translation of 1 Samuel 4–6, as well as 2 Samuel 6. Again, I do not present them side by side because I necessarily believe 2 Samuel 6 was originally part of an independent continuous narrative beginning with 1 Samuel 4–6, as Rost would have it. Rather, I present them together because these are the narratives featuring the Ark that will be discussed in this chapter.

1 Samuel 4:1b–22

ויצא ישׂראל לקראת פלשׁתים למלחמה ויחנו על־האבן העזר ופלשׁתים חנו באפק: **2** ויערכו פלשׁתים לקראת
ישׂראל ותטשׁ המלחמה וינגף ישׂראל לפני פלשׁתים ויכו במערכה בשׂדה כארבעת אלפים איש: **3** ויבא העם
אל־המחנה ויאמרו זקני ישׂראל למה נגפנו יהוה היום לפני פלשׁתים נקחה אלינו משׁלה את־ארון ברית יהוה
ויבא בקרבנו וישׁענו מכף איבינו: **4** וישׁלח העם שׁלה וישׂאו משׁם את ארון ברית־יהוה צבאות ישׁב הכרבים
ושׁם שׁני בני־עלי עם־ארון ברית האלהים חפני ופינחס: **5** ויהי כבוא ארון ברית־יהוה אל־המחנה וירעו כל־
ישׂראל תרועה גדולה ותהם הארץ: **6** וישׁמעו פלשׁתים את־קול התרועה ויאמרו מה קול התרועה הגדולה
הזאת במחנה העברים וידעו כי ארון יהוה בא אל־המחנה: **7** ויראו הפלשׁתים כי אמרו בא אלהים אל־המחנה
ויאמרו אוי לנו כי לא היתה כזאת אתמול שׁלשׁם: **8** אוי לנו מי יצילנו מיד האלהים האדירים האלה אלה הם

[196] Ibid., 19.

האלהים המכים את־מצרים בכל־מכה במדבר: 9 התחזקו והיו לאנשים פלשתים פן תעבדו לעברים כאשר
עבדו לכם והייתם לאנשים ונלחמתם: 10 וילחמו פלשתים וינגף ישראל וינסו איש לאהליו ותהי המכה גדולה
מאד ויפל מישראל שלשים אלף רגלי: 11 וארון אלהים נלקח ושני בני־עלי מתו חפני ופינחס: 12 וירץ איש־
בנימן מהמערכה ויבא שלה ביום ההוא ומדיו קרעים ואדמה על־ראשו: 13 ויבוא והנה עלי ישב על־הכסא יד
[יד] דרך מצפה כי־היה לבו חרד על ארון האלהים והאיש בא להגיד בעיר ותזעק כל־העיר: 14 וישמע עלי
את־קול הצעקה ויאמר מה קול ההמון הזה והאיש מהר ויבא ויגד לעלי: 15 ועלי בן־תשעים ושמנה שנה ועיניו
קמה ולא יכול לראות: 16 ויאמר האיש אל־עלי אנכי הבא מן־המערכה ואני מן־המערכה נסתי היום ויאמר
מה־היה הדבר בני: 17 ויען המבשר ויאמר נס ישראל לפני פלשתים וגם מגפה גדולה היתה בעם וגם־שני בניך
מתו חפני ופינחס וארון האלהים נלקחה: פ 18 ויהי כהזכירו את־ארון האלהים ויפל מעל־הכסא אחרנית בעד
יד השער ותשבר מפרקתו וימת כי־זקן האיש וכבד והוא שפט את־ישראל ארבעים שנה: 19 וכלתו אשת־
פינחס הרה ללת ותשמע את־השמעה אל־הלקח ארון האלהים ומת חמיה ואישה ותכרע ותלד כי־נהפכו עליה
צריה: 20 וכעת מותה ותדברנה הנצבות עליה אל־תיראי כי בן ילדת ולא ענתה ולא־שתה לבה: 21 ותקרא
לנער אי־כבוד לאמר גלה כבוד מישראל אל־הלקח ארון האלהים ואל־חמיה ואישה: 22 ותאמר גלה כבוד
מישראל כי נלקח ארון האלהים: פ

[1] Israel went out to engage the Philistines in battle; they encamped at Eben-ezer, whereas the Philistines encamped at Aphek. [2] The Philistines arrayed themselves against Israel, and the battle grew fierce.[197] Israel was struck down before the Philistines, who slayed about four thousand men on the battlefield. [3] When the troops came back to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has Yhwh struck us down today before the Philistines? Let us bring the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh here from Shiloh, so that it may come into our midst and deliver us from the hand of our enemies." [4] So the troops sent off to Shiloh, and carried up from there the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh of Hosts, who is seated on the cherubim. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the Ark of the Covenant of God.

[5] When the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh came into the camp, all of Israel let out a tremendous shout, such that the earth resounded. [6] When the Philistines heard the sound of the shouting, they said, "What is the sound of this tremendous shouting in the camp of the Hebrews?" When they found out that the Ark of Yhwh had come into the camp, [7] the Philistines were afraid. For they said, "God has come into the camp!" Then they said, "Woe to us! Surely nothing like this has ever happened before! [8] Woe to us! Who can rescue us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote Egypt with

[197] The verb in the MT here, וַתִּטֹּשׁ, whose subject is "the battle" (המלחמה), would appear to come from the root נטשׁ, "to forsake," which does not make much sense in this context. The LXX ἔκλινεν "[the battle] inclined/tipped over" (i.e., turned against Israel) would seem to translate Hebrew וַתֵּט, i.e., a Qal 3fs consecutive preterite from נטה, "to stretch out." My reading is based on another suggestion first offered by H. R. Smith, that the verb should be read as וַתִּקָּשׁ, from the root קשׁה, "to be difficult," i.e., "the battle grew fierce" (for reference, see S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1913], 46).

every plague in the wilderness! [9] Fortify yourselves, and be men, O Philistines, so that you don't become slaves to the Hebrews like they have been slaves to you; be men and fight!"

[10] So the Philistines fought, and Israel was struck down; they fled, each man to his tent. The slaughter was exceedingly great: thirty thousand Israelite foot soldiers fell. [11]Furthermore, the Ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli died, Hophni and Phinehas.

[12] A man of Benjamin ran from the battle and came to Shiloh on that day with torn clothes and dirt on his head. [13] When he came, Eli was sitting on the chair at the side of the road[198] watching, for his heart was trembling over the Ark of God. When the man came to spread the news in the city, the whole city cried out. [14] Eli heard the sound of the outcry, and he said, "What is this uproar?" Then the man quickly came and told Eli the news. [15] Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were fixed in place; he could not see.

[16] The man said to Eli, "I am the one who came from the battle; I fled from the battle today." He said, "What happened, my son?" [17] The one bearing news answered and said, "Israel fled before the Philistines; and also, there was a great slaughter among the troops; and also your two sons are dead, Hophni and Phinehas. And the Ark of God has been captured." [18]As soon as he mentioned the Ark of God, Eli fell backwards off the chair by the side of the gate; his neck broke and he died, for the man was old, and heavy. He had judged Israel for forty years.

[19] Now his daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. Upon hearing the news that the Ark of God had been captured, and that her father-in-law had died, and her husband, too, she crouched down and gave birth. For her pains turned upon her.

[20] When she was on the verge of death, her attendants said to her, "Don't worry! You've born a son!" But she did not respond; she paid no attention. [21] She named the boy Ichabod, saying, "Glory has been exiled from Israel," because the Ark of God had been captured, and because of her father-in-law and husband. [22] She said, "Glory has been exiled from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured."

1 Samuel 5

ופלשתים לקחו את ארון האלהים ויבאהו מאבן העזר אשדודה: [2] ויקחו פלשתים את־ארון האלהים ויביאו
אתו בית דגון ויציגו אתו אצל דגון: [3] וישכמו אשדודים ממחרת והנה דגון נפל לפניו ארצה לפני ארון יהוה

[198] My translation here reflects the qere, יד. The ketiv is יך, which is meaningless.

ויקחו את־דגון וישׂבו אתו למקומו׃ **4** וישׂכמו בבקר ממחרת והנה דגון נפל לפניו ארצה לפני ארון יהוה וראשׁ
דגון ושׁתי כפות ידיו כרתות אל־המפתן רק דגון נשׁאר עליו׃ **5** על־כן לא־ידרכו כהני דגון וכל־הבאים בית־
דגון על־מפתן דגון באשׁדוד עד היום הזה׃ ס **6** ותכבד יד־יהוה אל־האשׁדודים וישׁמם ויך אתם בעפלים
[ב][טחרים] את־אשׁדוד ואת־גבוליה׃ **7** ויראו אנשׁי־אשׁדוד כי־כן ואמרו לא־ישׁב ארון אלהי ישׂראל עמנו כי־
קשׁתה ידו עלינו ועל דגון אלהינו׃ **8** וישׁלחו ויאספו את־כל־סרני פלשׁתים אליהם ויאמרו מה־נעשׂה לארון
אלהי ישׂראל ויאמרו גת יסב ארון אלהי ישׂראל ויסבו את־ארון אלהי ישׂראל׃ ס **9** ויהי אחרי הסבו אתו ותהי
יד־יהוה בעיר מהומה גדולה מאד ויך את־אנשׁי העיר מקטן ועד־גדול וישׁתרו להם עפלים [טחרים׃] **10**
וישׁלחו את־ארון האלהים עקרון ויהי כבוא ארון האלהים עקרון ויזעקו העקרנים לאמר הסבו אלי את־ארון
אלהי ישׂראל להמיתני ואת־עמי׃ **11** וישׁלחו ויאספו את־כל־סרני פלשׁתים ויאמרו שׁלחו את־ארון אלהי
ישׂראל וישׁב למקמו ולא־ימית אתי ואת־עמי כי־היתה מהומת־מות בכל־העיר כבדה מאד יד האלהים שׁם׃ **12**
והאנשׁים אשׁר לא־מתו הכו בעפלים [ב][טחרים] ותעל שׁועת העיר השׁמים׃

1 Now the Philistines had taken the Ark of God, and they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. **2** The Philistines took the Ark of God and brought it to the house of Dagon. They set it up beside Dagon. **3** When the people of Ashdod woke up the next day, Dagon had fallen facedown on the ground in front of the Ark of Yhwh! So they took Dagon and returned him to his place. **4** When they woke up the next morning, Dagon had fallen facedown on the ground in front of the Ark of Yhwh—and the head of Dagon and his two hands were cut off on the threshold! Only the torso[199] of Dagon remained intact. **5** For this reason, the priests of Dagon and everyone who enters the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod until this day.

6 The hand of Yhwh was heavy against the inhabitants of Ashdod: he desolated them and smote them with tumors,[200] both Ashdod and its borders.[201] **7** When the people of Ashdod

[199] The MT literally reads: "Only Dagon remained upon him." My translation reflects the readings of the LXX and Vulgate, which have ἡ ῥάχις Δαγων "the spine of Dagon" and *dagon truncus*, "the trunk of Dagon," respectively.

[200] This is the first instance in the narrative where עפלים is written in the consonantal text, but the qere/ketiv note in the Masorah parva indicates that טחרים should be pronounced in its place. This substitution occurs regularly throughout the Ark Narrative, with a few exceptions (see the following footnotes). The term עפלים appears to be related to the anus, as attested by the LXX to 5:12 (ἐπλήγησαν εἰς τὰς ἕδρας, "they were afflicted in the seat") and the Vulgate to 6:5 (*quinque anos aureos*, "five golden anuses"). Thus, it would seem that the word עפלים refers to "hemorrhoids" and appears to have been considered foul language, whereas the recommended substitution טחרים (which denotes "tumors") seems to have been regarded as more polite. In fact, the words עפלים and טחרים may mean roughly the same thing, and even though hemorrhoids are "always uncomfortable and embarrassing," as Pope rightly observes (Marvin H. Pope, "Bible, Euphemism and Dysphemism in the," *ABD* 1:720–25), the language seems to have been organized in such a way that עפלים is set off limits and regarded as an offensive term, whereas טחרים is not. The Talmud lists specific examples of impolite words that occur in scripture and should not be pronounced. According to the Talmud, what is written offensively should be read politely. These words include sexual and scatological language, such as שָׂגַל (which may be rendered in English as the obscenity "fuck"), חָרָא, or חֲרִי ("shit"), and, in our narrative, עפלים. In the Masoretic Text, the words indicated as offensive in the Talmud are generally still written in the consonantal text (the ketiv), but with the vowels that correspond to

saw what was happening, they said, "The Ark of the God of Israel shall no longer dwell among us, for his hand has been hard upon us and upon Dagon our God." [8] They sent and gathered all the lords of the Philistines to them, and said, "What shall we do with the Ark of the God of Israel?" They said, "Let the Ark of the God of Israel go over to Gath." So they took the Ark of the God of Israel over. [9] After they took it over, the hand of Yhwh caused a massive panic in the city. He smote the people of the city from the greatest to the least, and tumors broke out on them.

[10] So they sent the Ark of God to Ekron. But when the Ark of God was approaching Ekron, the inhabitants of Ekron cried out, saying, "Why has the Ark of the God of Israel been brought over to me, in order to kill me and my people?" [11] So they sent and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and they said, "Send away the Ark of the God of Israel! Let it return to its place,[202] so that it will not kill me and my people!" For there was a panic of death throughout the entire city; the hand of God was very heavy there. [12] The people who did not die were smitten with tumors, and the desperate cry of the city rose up to heaven.

1 Samuel 6:1–7:2

1 Sam 6:1 ויהי ארון־יהוה בשׂדה פלשׁתים שׁבעה חדשׁים: **2** ויקראו פלשׁתים לכהנים ולקסמים לאמר מה־
נעשׂה לארון יהוה הודענו במה נשׁלחנו למקומו: **3** ויאמרו אם־משׁלחים את־ארון אלהי ישׂראל אל־תשׁלחו אתו
ריקם כי־השׁב תשׁיבו לו אשׁם אז תרפאו ונודע לכם למה לא־תסור ידו מכם: **4** ויאמרו מה האשׁם אשׁר נשׁיב
לו ויאמרו מספר סרני פלשׁתים חמשׁה עפלי [טחרי] זהב וחמשׁה עכברי זהב כי־מגפה אחת לכלם ולסרניכם: **5**
ועשׂיתם צלמי עפליכם [טחריכם] וצלמי עכבריכם המשׁחיתם את־הארץ ונתתם לאלהי ישׂראל כבוד אולי יקל
את־ידו מעליכם ומעל אלהיכם ומעל ארצכם: **6** ולמה תכבדו את־לבבכם כאשׁר כבדו מצרים ופרעה את־לבם
הלוא כאשׁר התעלל בהם וישׁלחום וילכו: **7** ועתה קחו ועשׂו עגלה חדשׁה אחת ושׁתי פרות עלות אשׁר לא־עלה
עליהם על ואסרתם את־הפרות בעגלה והשׁיבתם בניהם מאחריהם הביתה: **8** ולקחתם את־ארון יהוה ונתתם

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a less offensive substitute is provided in the marginal Masorah parva (the qere). In this way, pious scribes were able to preserve the sacred consonantal text without causing offense in the process of reading scripture, which sometimes contained words that were regarded as obscene.

[201] In his commentary on this verse, Rashi seeks to include the mice (which in the MT will only be mentioned later on; see 1 Sam 6:4–5) as part of the same affliction. He states that טחרים indicates "the mesentery of the large intestine; a plague of the rectum. Mice would enter their recta, disembowel them, and crawl out" (Avroham Yoseif Rosenberg, ed., *The Complete Jewish Bible, with Rashi Commentary*, online: http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/15834/jewish/Chapter-5.htm#showrashi=true).

[202] Here למקמו "to its place" may refer specifically to a sanctuary. Auld points out that the word "is frequently used in HB for a 'sanctuary' or 'shrine,' as in [1 Sam] 3:2, 9 above. … The fact that priests are among the experts consulted, along with diviners (6:2), tends to underscore that we should understand the 'place' (5:11) as a sacred one" (A. Graeme Auld, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 77).

אתו אל־העגלה ואת כלי הזהב אשר השבתם לו אשם תשימו בארגז מצדו ושלחתם אתו והלך: 9 וראיתם אם־
דרך גבולו יעלה בית שמש הוא עשה לנו את־הרעה הגדולה הזאת ואם־לא וידענו כי לא ידו נגעה בנו מקרה
הוא היה לנו: 10 ויעשו האנשים כן ויקחו שתי פרות עלות ויאסרום בעגלה ואת־בניהם כלו בבית: 11 וישמו
את־ארון יהוה אל־העגלה ואת הארגז ואת עכברי הזהב ואת צלמי טחריהם: 12 וישרנה הפרות בדרך על־דרך
בית שמש במסלה אחת הלכו הלך וגעו ולא־סרו ימין ושמאול וסרני פלשתים הלכים אחריהם עד־גבול בית
שמש: 13 ובית שמש קצרים קציר־חטים בעמק וישאו את־עיניהם ויראו את־הארון וישמחו לראות: 14
והעגלה באה אל־שדה יהושע בית־השמשי ותעמד שם ושם אבן גדולה ויבקעו את־עצי העגלה ואת־הפרות
העלו עלה ליהוה: ס 15 והלוים הורידו את־ארון יהוה ואת־הארגז אשר־אתו אשר־בו כלי־זהב וישמו אל־האבן
הגדולה ואנשי בית־שמש העלו עלות ויזבחו זבחים ביום ההוא ליהוה: 16 וחמשה סרני־פלשתים ראו וישבו
עקרון ביום ההוא: ס 17 ואלה טחרי הזהב אשר השיבו פלשתים אשם ליהוה לאשדוד אחד לעזה אחד
לאשקלון אחד לגת אחד לעקרון אחד: ס 18 ועכברי הזהב מספר כל־ערי פלשתים לחמשת הסרנים מעיר
מבצר ועד כפר הפרזי ועד אבל הגדולה אשר הניחו עליה את ארון יהוה עד היום הזה בשדה יהושע בית־
השמשי: 19 ויך באנשי בית־שמש כי ראו בארון יהוה ויך בעם שבעים איש חמשים אלף איש ויתאבלו העם
כי־הכה יהוה בעם מכה גדולה 20 ויאמרו אנשי בית־שמש מי יוכל לעמד לפני יהוה האלהים הקדוש הזה ואל־
מי יעלה מעלינו: ס 21 וישלחו מלאכים אל־יושבי קרית־יערים לאמר השבו פלשתים את־ארון יהוה רדו העלו
אתו אליכם:

1 Sam 7:1 ויבאו אנשי קרית יערים ויעלו את־ארון יהוה ויבאו אתו אל־בית אבינדב בגבעה ואת־אלעזר בנו
קדשו לשמר את־ארון יהוה: פ 2 ויהי מיום שבת הארון בקרית יערים וירבו הימים ויהיו עשרים שנה וינהו
כל־בית ישראל אחרי יהוה:

1 The Ark of Yhwh was in Philistine territory for seven months. **2** The Philistines summoned the priests and diviners, saying, “What shall we do with the Ark of Yhwh? Reveal to us: With what shall we send it away to its place?” **3** They replied, “If you are going to send away the Ark of the God of Israel, by all means do not send it away with nothing; rather, be sure to send back a guilt offering for it. Then you shall be healed and enlightened; shall not his hand withdraw from you?” **4** They said, “What is the guilt offering that we should send back for it?” They replied, “The number of the Philistine lords: five gold tumors and five gold mice.[203] For the same plague afflicted all of you and your lords. **5** You should make images of your tumors and images of your mice, the ones destroying the land; thus you will give honor to the God of Israel. Perhaps he will lighten his hand from upon you, and from upon your god, and from upon your land. **6** But why would you harden your hearts as Egypt and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? Didn’t it happen that after he made toys of them, they expelled them and they went on their way?

[203] Mice are introduced suddenly here without prior notice in the MT, whereas the LXX includes a statement in 1 Sam 5:6 that the land had become infested with mice: καὶ μέσον τῆς χώρας αὐτῆς ἀνεφύησαν μύες. The LXX mentions the mice again in 1 Sam 6:1: καὶ ἐξέζεσεν ἡ γῆ αὐτῶν μύας, “and the land was teeming with mice.”

7 "So now, make one new cart and take two nursing cows that have never borne a yoke. Bind the cows to the cart, but drive their babies who follow after them back home. **8** Then take the Ark of Yhwh and put it on the cart, and put the gold things that you are sending back for it as a guilt offering in a box by its side. You shall send it away, and it shall go. **9**Then watch: if it goes up the path of its own territory, towards Beth-Shemesh, then it was he who caused us this great evil; but if not, then we will know that it was not his hand that touched us—it happened to us by chance."

10 And so this is just what the people did. They took two nursing cows and bound them to the cart, but forced[204] their babies to stay home. **11** They put the Ark of Yhwh on the cart, along with the box and the gold mice and the images of their tumors.[205] **12** The cows went straight down the road, on the path to Beth-Shemesh, along a single raised way they walked—lowing as they went. They did not turn aside to the right or to the left. The lords of the Philistines followed after them up to the border of Beth-Shemesh.

13 Now Beth-Shemesh was harvesting wheat in the valley at the time. When they looked up and saw the Ark, they rejoiced at the sight of it. **14** When the cart came up to the field of Joshua of Beth-Shemesh, it stood there, at a place where there was a large rock. They split up the wood of the cart and offered up the cows as a burnt offering to Yhwh.

15 The Levites had brought down the Ark of Yhwh and the box that was with it, which had the gold things inside, and they placed them on the large rock. The people of Beth-Shemesh offered up burnt offerings and made sacrifices to Yhwh on that day. **16** The five lords of the Philistines looked on, and they returned to Ekron on that day.

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[204] In the MT, the verb is spelled כָּלוּ. Although the aleph does not appear in the spelling, this verb intended here is likely from the root כלא, "to restrain." Because the final aleph was not pronounced, it is often omitted in the orthography, and III-aleph verbs are sometimes spelled like roots that end in hey, as is the case here. For a fuller discussion of this phenomenon with other examples, see Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2008), 186–87. Gesenius also includes a discussion of the relationship between roots that end in aleph and those ending in hey (Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. and enl. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley [Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006; originally published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1910], 216).

[205] Elsewhere in the narrative, as observed above in n. 21, the apparently offensive term עפלים ("hemorrhoids") is written in the consonantal text of the MT (the ketiv), and the apparently inoffensive term טחרים ("tumors"), which was to be read instead, written in the margin (the qere). In this verse, however, the usual qere, טחרים, has made its way into the text itself. The secondary nature of טחרים in the consonantal text is supported by the fact that multiple Hebrew manuscripts have עפלים here instead. It is possible that the change to the consonantal text may have been unintentional; that is, the scribe may have been so accustomed to reading עפלים as טחרים that he accidentally wrote טחרים. If this was not a scribal error, then it is likely a case of a scribal emendation (*tiqqun sopherim*), where the scribe intentionally changed the consonantal text to produce a less offensive reading. See also verse 17 below, where the same phenomenon occurs, with טחרים written in the consonantal text instead of עפלים.

17 These are the gold tumors[206] that the Philistines sent back as a guilt offering to Yhwh: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, and one for Ekron. **18** The gold mice corresponded to the number of all the Philistine cities belonging to the five lords, from the fortified city to the smallest village. As for the great rock[207] upon which the Ark of Yhwh was set to rest, it is still in the field of Joshua of Beth-Shemesh until this day.

19 He struck down[208] the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh because they looked upon the Ark of Yhwh. He struck down among the people fifty thousand and seventy men.[209] The people mourned because Yhwh had caused a great slaughter among the people. **20** The inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh said, "Who can stand before Yhwh this holy god? And to whom shall he go up from upon us?" **21** They sent messengers to the residents of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the Ark of Yhwh. Come down and take it up to you."

7:1 So the people of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the Ark of Yhwh, and they brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. His son Eleazar was consecrated to attend to the Ark of Yhwh. **7:2** From the day the Ark was settled in Kiriath-jearim, many days passed, about twenty years. The whole house of Israel lamented after Yhwh.

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[206] Here, too, טחרים is written instead of the usual עפלים.

[207] The MT has אבל, "meadow," but my translation follows the LXX, which reads אבן, "rock." This translation is more sensible, since the Ark was set on a rock in v. 15 above.

[208] Here LXX$^{(B)}$ has Καὶ οὐκ ἠσμένισαν οἱ υἱοὶ Ιεχονιου ἐν τοῖς ἀνδράσιν Βαιθσαμυς, ὅτι εἶδαν κιβωτὸν κυρίου, "But the sons of Jeconiah did not rejoice with the people of Beth-Shemesh when they saw the Ark of Yhwh." Many interpreters take this to be part of the original tale and thus include it in their translation (see, e.g., NRSV). Others believe this was an explanatory gloss added by the LXX to account for an otherwise baffling outbreak of divine violence. Even with this "explanation," however, the situation remains murky. For further text-critical comments on this verse, see P. Kyle McCarter, *1 Samuel*, AB 8 (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 130 and Antony F. Campbell, S. J., *1 Samuel*, FOTL 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 78.

[209] The text here is almost certainly corrupt. Two different figures are provided here in apposition: שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ חמִשִּׁים אֶלֶף אִישׁ, literally "seventy men, fifty thousand men." The absence of the conjunction between the two numbers is highly anomalous and seems to indicate a textual error or insertion. A few Hebrew manuscripts do not include the second figure, fifty thousand, which in any case is an unrealistically large number of casualties for a small town like Beth-Shemesh. (On the other hand, realism is hardly to be taken as a guiding principle for interpreting such a fantastical tale.) Josephus cites the number of victims as seventy and makes no mention of the fifty thousand. For these reasons, translators often prefer to render the first figure, seventy, and disregard the second. But whether we choose one figure or conflate the two, the point is that an extraordinary slaughter occurred in this Israelite town. Regarding this verse, Driver has sagely observed, "it is not possible to restore the text with entire certainty" (S. R. Driver, *Notes*, 58).

2 Samuel 6:1–23

ויסף עוד דוד את־כל־בחור בישׂראל שׁלשׁים אלף: **2** ויקם וילך דוד וכל־העם אשׁר אתו מבעלי יהודה להעלות
משׁם את ארון האלהים אשׁר־נקרא שׁם שׁם יהוה צבאות ישׁב הכרבים עליו: **3** וירכבו את־ארון האלהים אל־
עגלה חדשׁה וישׂאהו מבית אבינדב אשׁר בגבעה ועזא ואחיו בני אבינדב נהגים את־העגלה חדשׁה: **4** וישׂאהו
מבית אבינדב אשׁר בגבעה עם ארון האלהים ואחיו הלך לפני הארון: **5** ודוד וכל־בית ישׂראל משׂחקים לפני
יהוה בכל עצי ברושׁים ובכנרות ובנבלים ובתפים ובמנענעים ובצלצלים: **6** ויבאו עד־גרן נכון וישׁלח עזא אל־
ארון האלהים ויאחז בו כי שׁמטו הבקר: **7** ויחר־אף יהוה בעזה ויכהו שׁם האלהים על־השׁל וימת שׁם עם ארון
האלהים: **8** ויחר לדוד על אשׁר פרץ יהוה פרץ בעזה ויקרא למקום ההוא פרץ עזה עד היום הזה: **9** וירא דוד
את־יהוה ביום ההוא ויאמר איך יבוא אלי ארון יהוה: **10** ולא־אבה דוד להסיר אליו את־ארון יהוה על־עיר דוד
ויטהו דוד בית עבד־אדום הגתי: **11** וישׁב ארון יהוה בית עבד אדם הגתי שׁלשׁה חדשׁים ויברך יהוה את־עבד
אדם ואת־כל־ביתו: **12** ויגד למלך דוד לאמר ברך יהוה את־בית עבד אדם ואת־כל־אשׁר־לו בעבור ארון
האלהים וילך דוד ויעל את־ארון האלהים מבית עבד אדם עיר דוד בשׂמחה: **13** ויהי כי צעדו נשׂאי ארון־יהוה
ששׁה צעדים ויזבח שׁור ומריא: **14** ודוד מכרכר בכל־עז לפני יהוה ודוד חגור אפוד בד: **15** ודוד וכל־בית
ישׂראל מעלים את־ארון יהוה בתרועה ובקול שׁופר: **16** והיה ארון יהוה בא עיר דוד ומיכל בת־שׁאול נשׁקפה
בעד החלון ותרא את־המלך דוד מפזז ומכרכר לפני יהוה ותבז לו בלבה: **17** ויבאו את־ארון יהוה ויצגו אתו
במקומו בתוך האהל אשׁר נטה־לו דוד ויעל דוד עלות לפני יהוה ושׁלמים: **18** ויכל דוד מהעלות העולה
והשׁלמים ויברך את־העם בשׁם יהוה צבאות: **19** ויחלק לכל־העם לכל־המון ישׂראל למאישׁ ועד־אשׁה לאישׁ
חלת לחם אחת ואשׁישׁה אחת וילך כל־העם איש לביתו: **20** וישׁב דוד לברך את־ביתו ותצא מיכל
בת־שׁאול לקראת דוד ותאמר מה־נכבד היום מלך ישׂראל אשׁר נגלה היום לעיני אמהות עבדיו כהגלות נגלות
אחד הרקים: **21** ויאמר דוד אל־מיכל לפני יהוה אשׁר בחר־בי מאביך ומכל־ביתו לצות אתי נגיד על־עם יהוה
על־ישׂראל ושׂחקתי לפני יהוה: **22** ונקלתי עוד מזאת והייתי שׁפל בעיני ועם־האמהות אשׁר אמרת עמם
אכבדה: **23** ולמיכל בת־שׁאול לא־היה לה ילד עד יום מותה: פ

1 David again gathered together all the young men in Israel, thirty thousand. **2** David and all the people who were with him got up and went from Baale-judah to bring up from there the Ark of God, which was called there[210] by the name "Yhwh of Hosts, who is seated on the cherubim." **3** They loaded the Ark of God onto a new cart and they brought it up from the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Now Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were leading the new cart. **4** They brought it up from the house of Abinadab on the hill with the Ark of God, and Ahio was walking in front of the Ark. **5** Now David

[210] Here I have chosen to read שָׁם "there" (as it is pointed in many other Hebrew manuscripts) instead of the MT שֵׁם, "name," which would be redundant with the following word. Although it is grammatically possible to translate these two instances of שֵׁם back to back (see the JPS translation, for example, or Driver's literal rendering "over which is called a name, (even) the name of" [S. R. Driver, *Notes*, 266]), it is simpler to read as שָׁם "there" instead. Another solution is to omit one of the instances of שֵׁם, as does the LXX.

and the whole house of Israel were frolicking in front of Yhwh with every kind of wood instrument,[211] with lyres and harps and timbrels and castanets and cymbals.

6 As they approached the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah stretched out his hand[212] to the Ark of God and he took hold of it, for the oxen had stumbled. **7** The anger of Yhwh blazed forth against Uzzah, and God struck him down there.[213] So he died there beside the Ark of God. **8** David was very angry over the fact that Yhwh had burst out against Uzzah. That place is called "Outburst of Uzzah" until this day. **9** David was afraid of Yhwh on that day and said, "How will the Ark of Yhwh come to me?" **10** David was not willing to take the Ark of Yhwh along with him to the city of David, and so David put it in the house of Obed Edom the Gittite.

11 The Ark of Yhwh remained in the house of Obed Edom the Gittite for three months. Yhwh blessed Obed Edom and his entire household. **12** When King David was told, "Yhwh has blessed the house of Obed Edom and all that is his because of the Ark of God," David went and brought up the Ark of God from the house of Obed Edom to the city of David with great joy.

13 When the ones carrying the Ark of Yhwh had marched six paces, an ox and a fatling were sacrificed. **14** David was dancing with all his might before Yhwh, and David was girded in a linen ephod. **15** David and the whole house of Israel were bringing up the Ark of Yhwh with shouting and the sound of the shofar. **16** When the Ark of Yhwh arrived in the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul was looking out the window. When she saw King David leaping and dancing before Yhwh, she despised him in her heart.

17 They brought the Ark of Yhwh and they set it up in its place within the tent that David had pitched for it. Then David offered up burnt offerings and peace offerings before

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[211] The MT literally reads, בכל עצי ברושים "with all the cypress wood." Along with many other interpreters, I understand this to refer to musical instruments made of this type of wood. For more information on this and on musical instruments in the ancient Near East, see David P. Wright, "Music and Dance in 2 Samuel 6," *JBL* 121 (2002): 201–25. Other scholars believe that the original meaning of this phrase is preserved in the parallel account in 1 Chron 13:8, בְּכָל־עֹז וּבְשִׁירִים, "with all [their] strength and with songs." There is clearly a graphic similarity between this phrase and the one in 2 Sam 6:5.

[212] In the MT, "his hand" does not appear, but some Hebrew manuscripts do include את-ידו, which is also attested in other versions as well as in 1 Chron 13:9.

[213] The MT includes the phrase על־השׁל here, which is often translated "because of the error" (see the KJV, ASV, NIV, and JPS translations, for example). Such a translation assumes השׁל is from the root שׁלה , which in Aramaic means "to act erroneously." The Aramaic שׁלה corresponds to the Hebrew שׁגה, "to err, go astray." But, as Driver observes, "שׁלה is scarcely a pure Hebrew word: where it occurs, it is either dialectical (2 Ki. 4) or late (2 Ch.); so that its appearance in early Hebrew is unexpected" (Driver, *Notes*, 267–68). The words are missing in the LXX, which suggests that perhaps the phrase was not originally part of the narrative. Auld notes: "The expression 'l-hšl is a notorious puzzle, long explained as a corrupt shortening of 'l 'šr-šlḥ ydw 'l-h'rwn ('on account of the fact that he had put his hand on the ark') in 1 Chr 13:10, a reading largely confirmed by 4QSam[a]" (Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 408). Because the meaning of השׁל is so uncertain, I have chosen to follow the LXX here and leave the phrase untranslated.

Yhwh. **18** When David had finished offering up the burnt offerings and the peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of Yhwh of Hosts. **19** To all the people, to the whole multitude of Israel, to man and woman alike, he distributed one round of bread, and one portion, and one raisin cake. Then all the people went back home.

20 When David returned to bless his household, Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David. She said, "How the king of Israel has honored himself today! The one who exposed himself today in the sight of his servants' girls—totally exposed, like one of the riffraff!" **21** David replied to Michal, "It was before Yhwh—who chose me over your father and over his whole household, appointing me as prince over the people of Yhwh, over Israel—before Yhwh that I frolicked! **22** I may be even more humiliated than this, and totally abase myself,[214] but among those girls you mentioned, among them I shall be honored!" **23** And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child until her dying day.

Relationship between Yhwh and the Ark: "Interviewing" Our Characters

When discussing the theology of the Ark Narrative, it is important to specify the subject of our investigation. Are we referring to the character and deeds of the Ark, or those of Yhwh? Or are these two entities one and the same? The relationship between the Ark of the Covenant and Yhwh in these texts is difficult to delineate precisely. Throughout 1–2 Samuel, it appears that Israel's god Yhwh is held responsible for what happens when the Ark is present, and so we might say that Yhwh animates this object, or acts through it. Certainly, there is a close relationship between Yhwh and the Ark, and the two at times appear to be conflated in these narratives. But is it accurate to treat the character and deeds of the Ark as though they were identical to those of Yhwh himself? Let us begin by turning to the text and "interviewing" the characters of 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 in an attempt to determine their understanding of the relationship between Yhwh and his

[214] Instead of the MT והייתי שׁפל בעיני, lit. "I will become low in my eyes," the LXX has ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς σου, "in your eyes" (a reading attested in other versions as well).

Ark. As we proceed, we'll also discuss the narrator's presentation of this relationship alongside the characters' perspective.

1. The Israelite Elders (1 Sam 4:3)

Should one venture to translate the Ark Narrative, as I have above, there are a number of cases where it is difficult to decide whether the subject of a verb or the antecedent of a pronoun should be rendered as Yhwh or the Ark. Take, for example, the statement by the Israelite elders at the very beginning of 1 Samuel 4. In response to their initial military defeat by the Philistines, the elders of Israel ask:

למה נגפנו יהוה היום לפני פלשתים נקחה אלינו משלה את־ארון ברית יהוה ויבא בקרבנו וישענו מכף איבינו

"Why has Yhwh struck us down today before the Philistines? Let us bring the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh here from Shiloh, so that it may come into our midst and deliver us from the hand of our enemies" (1 Sam 4:3). In contrast to several well-respected English translations of this verse (including the NRSV and NJPS), which render the subject of ויבא and וישענו as Yhwh, my own translation understands the subject of these verbs to be the Ark (hence, I have translated "it" instead of "he").[215] In grammatical terms, it is possible for either Yhwh or the Ark to function as the subject here, but in the immediately subsequent verses, the Ark is specified as the subject of the verb בא when it arrives in the Israelite camp (1 Sam 4:5, 6). I therefore take the subject of these verbs to be the Ark in 1 Sam 4:3, although admittedly it may not be possible to determine whether the intended subject is Yhwh or his Ark in this case.

[215] There is disagreement among commentators regarding the subject of these verbs. Some scholars decline to make a decision between the two options and instead refer to the subject as "he/it" (see, e.g., Peter D. Miscall, *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986], 27).

The speech of the Israelite elders might be taken to suggest that they understand the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh as somehow distinct from Yhwh himself. That is, if the elders truly believe that it was Yhwh who struck them down in battle, as they state in 1 Sam 4:3,[216] then what reason would they have to think that Yhwh in the form of the Ark would treat them any differently? It is possible that the Israelites may have thought that the presence of the Ark on the battlefield would have effectively coaxed or coerced Yhwh into changing his mind and acting on their behalf. Lyle Eslinger suggests an underlying idea that the deity might have been influenced through the handling of his Ark: "The point of bringing the ark of the covenant of Yhwh (the name of Israel's covenantal God) is to remind Yhwh that his actions do not agree with his covenant. He is supposed to smite Philistines, not Israelites."[217]

A number of scholars have taken the short speech in 1 Sam 4:3 as grounds for indictment of the Israelite elders. It is frequently claimed that the elders are acting presumptuously in bringing the Ark to the battlefield, as if it were a magical object that could force the deity into action.[218] Robert Alter, for example, claims "the elders arrogate to themselves a sacred object for their own purposes, conceiving the Ark magically or

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[216] The way the narrator presents the defeat in 1 Sam 4:2 also implies that Yhwh himself struck the Israelites down on the battlefield. As Auld notes, "The narrator uses the verb *ngp*, which suggests a divinely inflicted 'blow' or plague. Throughout the Bible, Yhwh is most frequently the subject of active parts of this verb and can often be assumed to be the unspoken agent when the verb is passive" (A. Graeme Auld, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 65).

[217] Lyle M. Eslinger, *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1–12* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 166.

[218] Gary A. Anderson is one of many biblical scholars who finds fault with the elders: "Eschewing a posture of penance and allowing God no time to respond, the elders concoct their own solution: they race to the shrine, remove the ark of the covenant, believing its sacramental agency can assure them a victory. By failing to address the sin that occasioned the terrible defeat, the elders have unwittingly turned the ark into something of a lucky charm" ("'Through Those Who Are Near to Me, I Will Show Myself Holy': Nadab and Abihu and Apophatic Theology," *CBQ* 77 [2015]: 1–19, at 4).

fetishistically as a vehicle of power that they can manipulate for military ends."[219] In Campbell's opinion, however, such an interpretation is misguided; according to him, the idea that the elders treat the Ark "'magically or fetishistically' reflects a modern prejudice that is not in the text … To attribute the second defeat to God's punishment of Israel for their blind trust in a cultic object smacks of an inappropriate and anachronistic polemic against sacramentalism."[220]

2. The Philistine Warriors (1 Sam 4:5–8)

When the second battle commences and the Philistines hear that the Israelites have brought the Ark of Yhwh with them, the Philistines are terrified. Like the Israelite elders, the Philistine warriors also expect that the physical presence of the Ark will channel an overwhelming divine power on the battlefield. Upon hearing that the Ark of Yhwh has arrived in the Israelite camp, the Philistines cry out in despair,

אוי לנו מי יצילנו מיד האלהים האדירים האלה אלה הם האלהים המכים את־מצרים בכל־מכה במדבר

"Woe to us! Who can rescue us from the hand of these mighty gods? These are the gods who smote Egypt with every plague in the wilderness!" (1 Sam 4:8). Here the Philistines not only identify the Ark of Yhwh as a deity, but they also construe the supernatural force as a plural. Although the Hebrew word for God, אלהים, is plural in form, it is considered a "plural of majesty" and is almost always treated grammatically as a singular, especially

[219] Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 22.

[220] Antony F. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, FOTL 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 65.

when it refers to the Israelite deity.[221] In this declaration, however, the Philistines use אלהים as a definite plural noun and modify it with masculine plural adjectives: האלהים האדירים האלה, "these mighty gods." They also use a masculine plural participle and pronoun: הם האלהים המכים, lit: "these are the smiting gods."

Of course, as many commentators have pointed out, this statement by the Philistines is inaccurate, at least according to the history of Israel as preserved in the Hebrew Bible. That is, if the Philistines are referring to the Ark itself, as they seem to be doing, this entity cannot be credited with spreading plagues among the Egyptians. For, according to the accounts of its origin in both Exodus 25 and Deuteronomy 10, the Ark was constructed during the Israelites' encampment at Mount Sinai, which took place only *after* their God smote the Egyptians with plagues. Moreover, the God of Israel did not plague the Egyptians in the wilderness, but in their homeland of Egypt (see Exodus 7–12). In addition to misconstruing the history of the Israelites, then, it seems that the Philistines may have also misconstrued Israelite theology by conceiving their deity as plural here, and perhaps also in treating Yhwh and his Ark as coterminous.

3. The Wife of Phinehas (1 Sam 4:19–22)

When the Philistines capture the Ark in battle and take it away, the Israelites are devastated. The judge of Israel, Eli, falls off his chair, breaks his neck, and dies upon hearing the news. Eli's daughter-in-law, the pregnant wife of Phinehas, has a similar reaction. When she hears about the loss of the Ark, the pregnant woman immediately

[221] There are a few exceptions to this rule, such as 2 Sam 7:23, הָלְכוּ־אֱלֹהִים. For a fuller discussion of this phenomenon, see Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 518.

goes into labor and proceeds to die in childbirth. Based on the sequence of events, it appears that the wife of Phinehas dies in agony over the loss of the Ark. Ichabod, the name she gives her son, is this woman's interpretation of what has just occurred on the national level: "Glory (כבוד) has been exiled from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured" (1 Sam 4:22). This term, כבוד, is frequently used throughout the biblical corpus to refer to Yhwh himself.[222] It seems, then, that the wife of Phinehas understands the departure of the Ark from Israel as tantamount to the loss of their God.

4. The Philistine Civilians (1 Samuel 5–6)

Despite their fear of confronting the Ark-bearing Israelite army, the Philistine warriors nevertheless manage to win the battle against the Israelites and carry off the Ark of Yhwh to their territory. And yet, if they were mistaken about the nuances of Israelite history and theology, the Philistines are not at all mistaken with regard to the dangerous nature of the Ark. During its sojourn in Philistine territory, the Ark of Yhwh earns a fearsome reputation. First, when the Philistines return with the Ark, they place it in the temple of Dagon at Ashdod, alongside the statue of Dagon. The Ark of Yhwh, however, is not a well-behaved captive. During the first night of their cohabitation, the statue of Dagon collapses in front of the Ark. After the second night, the Philistines wake to find that, not only has Dagon again fallen facedown before the Ark, but his head and hands have also been cut off and are strewn over the threshold (1 Sam 5:3–4). We are not privy to the

[222] See, e.g., Exod 24:16–17; Ezek 10:18–19; 11:22; Ps 24:7–10; 79:9. According to Frank Moore Cross, כבוד in 1 Sam 4:21–22 is "a technical term, namely the refulgent and radiant aureole which surrounds the deity in his manifestations or theophanies" (Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973], 158 n. 30).

nocturnal interactions between the two cultic objects. But the evidence would suggest that Yhwh's Ark physically dominated and decapitated the rival god in his own house.

The Philistines are distraught over the way Yhwh has treated their god. They are also distraught over the effects of the Ark's presence on the general population. The account of the Philistine devastation begins in 1 Sam 5:6. We are told that the Philistines suffer severe plagues, and that those who do not die are tortured by some kind of boils or tumors, perhaps monstrous hemorrhoids.[223] The account of the plague alternates between statements from the narrator regarding what is occurring, and interpretations of the events by the Philistines themselves. For example, 1 Sam 5:6 gives the narrator's perspective on what occurred when the Ark resided in Ashdod: "The hand of Yhwh was heavy against the inhabitants of Ashdod: he desolated them and smote them with tumors, both Ashdod and its borders."

In the very next verse, the Philistines' interpretation of the events is articulated: "When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, 'The Ark of the God of Israel shall no longer dwell among us, for his hand has been hard (קָשְׁתָה יָדוֹ) upon us and upon Dagon our God'" (1 Sam 5:7). The view of the narrator and that of the Philistines largely overlap.

In verse 10, the residents of Ekron protest the transfer of the Ark to their city: "So they sent the Ark of God to Ekron. But when the Ark of God was approaching Ekron, the inhabitants of Ekron cried out, saying, 'Why has the Ark of the God of Israel been brought over to me, in order to kill me and my people?'" (1 Sam 5:10). Verse 11 reiterates the plea of the residents of Ekron, and concludes with the narrator's perspective

[223] See note on 1 Sam 5:6 in translation section above.

on the events: "So they sent and gathered all the lords of the Philistines and they said, 'Send away the Ark of the God of Israel! Let it return to its place, so that it will not kill me and my people!' For there was a panic of death throughout the entire city; the hand of God was very heavy there" (1 Sam 5:11). The Philistines of Ashdod and Ekron clearly regard the presence of the physical Ark as the cause of their affliction, and the narrative events appear to confirm their view. For when the Ark is removed from the Philistine cities, they finally experience relief.

5. The Israelites of Beth-Shemesh (1 Sam 6:13–21)

When the Ark arrives in the Israelite town of Beth-Shemesh following its seven-month sojourn with the Philistines, the townspeople greet the Ark with great joy and offer sacrifices to Yhwh to celebrate its return (1 Sam 6:13–15). Their exultation abruptly turns to mourning after fifty thousand and seventy people are killed when they look upon the Ark (1 Sam 6:19).[224] Following this terrible event, the people of Beth-Shemesh cry out: "Who can stand before Yhwh this holy god? And to whom will he go up (יעלה) from upon us?" (1 Sam 6:20). The people then request that the residents of a neighboring town, Kiriath-jearim, "come down (רדו) and take up (העלו)" *the Ark* from them (1 Sam 6:21). The subject of יעלה in 1 Sam 6:20 appears to be Yhwh, as the Ark is not mentioned in the preceding clause. But in 1 Sam 6:21, the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh entreat the people of Kiriath-jearim to help them by removing the Ark from them, thus using the same verb, עלה "to go/bring up," to describe the departure of deity and Ark. Thus we can see that Yhwh and the Ark are conflated here. Like the Philistines, the Beth-Shemites appear

[224] See translation note on 1 Sam 6:19 above.

to identify the Ark as the holy god Yhwh and attempt to rid themselves of its destructive powers by passing the Ark along to their neighbors. Despite the Ark's violent tendencies, the Israelites are said to have "lamented after Yhwh" (1 Sam 7:2) during the twenty years that the Ark was confined in the house of Abinadab at Kiriath-jearim, as though the absence of the Ark meant the absence of Yhwh.

Such a view was not unanimously upheld in ancient Israel, as may be observed from other biblical texts that describe the relationship between God and the Ark. When David's son Solomon succeeds in building the Temple in Jerusalem and the Ark is ceremoniously ushered inside, for example, the king is careful to acknowledge that Yhwh should not be imagined as actually dwelling within the walls of an earthly building. In his dedicatory prayer, Solomon declares: "Will God truly live upon the earth? The heavens and the highest heavens cannot even contain you! How much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kgs 8:27). Here we have a clear articulation of the classic Deuteronomistic view of a transcendent deity who does not dwell on earth. Such a perspective is at odds with the immanent view of divine presence expressed in the narratives featuring the Ark of Yhwh in 1–2 Samuel.

Sommer's Interpretation of the Ark Narrative: Competing Theologies

In his book, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (2009), Benjamin Sommer offers a compelling discussion of corporeality in relation to the Israelite deity. In contrast to many other modern scholars and theologians, who deny or downplay the corporeality of Yhwh, Sommer insists that the God of ancient Israel had a body. Moreover, Sommer argues that, within certain biblical traditions (especially in the

Pentateuchal sources J and E), "God has many bodies located in sundry places in the world that God created."[225] For example, Yhwh is known to make earthly appearances in the form of a regular human being, as when he visits Abraham by the oaks of Mamre in Genesis 18. So too, Jacob wrestles all night with a "man" (איש) by the Jabbok in Genesis 32, and only later realizes that his opponent was actually God, אלהים. In other cases, Yhwh manifests himself in a less anthropomorphic manner. He appears to Moses as a burning bush in Exodus 3, for example. At times, the divine presence is conceived as inhabiting objects made of wood and stone, as Sommer notes in his discussion of the 'asherah and maṣṣebot.[226]

Sommer refers to this worldview, wherein the deity may take on multiple forms without being reduced to them, as "the fluidity model." He draws numerous parallels between the fluidity model as articulated in ancient Israelite literature and concepts of shifting divinity in ancient Mesopotamia and Canaan. The multiplicity of this model posed a problem for the monotheistic worldview that would become dominant in ancient Israel, however. For this reason, the Hebrew Bible does not present a uniform view on the subject. Whereas certain biblical traditions (J, E, archaic poems, e.g., Deuteronomy 33 and Genesis 49, and northern works such as Hosea) largely embrace the fluidity model, Sommer sees Priestly and Deuteronomic literature as rejecting its validity. These traditions insist that God cannot be multiply embodied. And if God has only one body, it follows that only one place can ever be holy at a time. Thus, the Priestly and Deuteronomic schools emphasize the importance of a single holy place—namely, the

[225] Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

[226] Ibid., 44–54.

tabernacle and temple, respectively. Sommer refers to such a view of holy space as "locative," as opposed to the "utopic" perspective of JE, where numerous places might be made holy depending on where God is embodied at any given time.

Apart from the traditional Pentateuchal sources of J, E, P, and D, Sommer describes another school of thought, the Zion-Sabaoth theology, which holds that Yhwh resides in the Jerusalem Temple on Mount Zion. This tradition often refers to the deity as "Yhwh of Hosts," or Yhwh-Sabaoth, and regards him as being eternally enthroned on the cherubim of the Ark. Closely related to the Zion-Sabaoth theology is the belief that the protective divine presence made Jerusalem inviolable; this belief is most clearly articulated in several psalms (e.g., Pss 46 and 48) and in First Isaiah (e.g., 1:7–9, 8:7–15, 18:3–7). Because the Ark constitutes Yhwh's resting place in the form of a throne in this literature, it follows that the Ark and Yhwh are conceived as being closely interrelated. Sommer detects the Zion-Sabaoth theology in texts such as Num 10:35–36, the "Song of the Ark," which indicates that wherever the Ark would go, Yhwh went as well.

The Deuteronomic school stands in stark contrast to Yhwh-Sabaoth theology. Deuteronomy denies that God lives on earth, insisting that he dwells invisibly in heaven. As we have discussed in chapter 1, the Ark is presented in Deuteronomy as a wooden box that contained the tablets of the law. No mention is made of gold or cherubim in the account of its construction in Deuteronomy 10. We have already pointed out that there is no single, unified view of the Ark presented within the books that make up the Deuteronomistic History. Sommer also acknowledges that multiple perspectives on the Ark are attested in the Deuteronomistic History. Yet in his reading, the final form of the Ark Narrative in 1 Samuel 4–6 strongly advocates a Deuteronomic theology:

> The ark narrative as found in the final form of the Book of Samuel presents a debate between two ways of understanding divine presence. One of these is known to us from P's *kavod* theology and from the theology of the Zion-Sabaoth texts, in which the ark provides a resting place for the body of God; the other is the deuteronomic *shem* theology, in which the ark houses only the verbal record of God's covenant and not God's physical presence. These chapters repeatedly allude to both theologies, but in the end they reject the former while endorsing the latter.[227]

I would note at the outset that the allusions to the Deuteronomic *shem* theology that supposedly occur in this narrative are so subtle that one might wonder whether they are allusions at all. By contrast, the characteristic markers of Zion-Sabaoth theology are quite obvious throughout the Ark Narrative: the name Yhwh-Sabaoth/Yhwh of Hosts is used, the deity is pictured as enthroned upon the Ark (1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2), and the narrator and the characters appear to regard Yhwh and Ark as intimately related. Moreover, in 2 Samuel 6, David settles the Ark in Jerusalem, which is its rightful home according to Zion-Sabaoth theology. On the other hand, the only explicit linguistic reference to the *shem* theology that Sommer names occurs in the title of the deity in 1 Sam 4:4, ארון ברית־יהוה צבאות יֹשֵׁב הכרבים, "the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh of Hosts, who is seated upon the cherubim." Although the bulk of the appellation constitutes evidence for the Zion-Sabaoth theology, Sommer points out that the embedded ארון ברית־יהוה, "the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh," is the standard name for the Ark in Deuteronomic literature. He believes this name has been inserted here in order to emphasize that the Ark symbolizes but does not contain the divine presence. This claim is dubious. It is true that the MT records the name of the Ark with ברית several times in 1 Samuel 4 where this is omitted in the LXX (1 Sam 4:3, 4, 5). It appears that these may

[227] Ibid., 102.

represent later insertions, since otherwise the term ברית is not used to refer to the Ark throughout the Ark Narrative. But as other commentators have noted, the name ארון ברית־יהוה appears in other biblical texts apart from the Deuteronomic corpus (e.g., Num 10:33, 14:44). The title therefore cannot be claimed as the exclusive "property" of Dtr. Furthermore, even when this name for the Ark occurs within biblical books labeled as Deuteronomistic (as in the present text, or the book of Joshua for that matter), this does not guarantee a particular view of the deity in relation to the Ark. Thus, we can hardly conclude that the classic Deuteronomic *shem* theology is being promoted by the sporadic inclusion of ברית in the Ark's title in 1 Samuel 4.

Sommer reads the Ark Narrative (i.e., 1 Samuel 4–6) as an early saga that was later edited by a Deuteronomistic redactor. According to Sommer, the theological point of the Ark Narrative is to show that Yhwh does not inhabit the Ark in any way. He summarizes his thesis as follows: "The ark narrative demotes the ark by insisting that God does not live in it or on it, even as it acknowledges the ark's gravity and importance to God."[228] He understands 1 Samuel 4 in particular as polemicizing against the *kavod* and Zion-Sabaoth theology, in which the deity is conceived as being physically intertwined with the Ark. In Sommer's view, the characters in 1 Samuel 4 who support such a view are not presented in a positive light, and for this reason, their concept of the Ark is discredited. According to Sommer, proponents of this theology include the Philistines, the wife of Phinehas, Eli, and the elders of Israel. But, in fact, this is everyone in 1 Samuel 4! There are no characters left to uphold what Sommer sees as the correct

[228] Ibid., 102.

theological view according to the Deuteronomistic redactor. Of course, it is not necessary for any characters within a given tale to espouse the view advocated by that text. The way the narrative events are presented as unfolding can point to the intended ideology. Sommer believes this is how 1 Samuel 4 functions. Even though all the characters in this chapter appear to conceive of Yhwh and the Ark as intimately related, nonetheless the Ark does not attain victory on the battlefield as the Israelites had hoped it would. According to Sommer, this fact suffices to show that the deity is not present in the Ark.

There are numerous problems with this reasoning, however. First, the mere fact that the Ark does not bring victory on the battlefield does not mean that it was incapable of doing so. The battle did not go as the Israelite elders had anticipated, but the defeat of the Israelites in itself does not prove anything about the relationship between Yhwh and the Ark. Yhwh may well have been present with the Ark that the Israelites brought to battle; he simply may have chosen not to help them, or even to fight actively against the Israelites from the Ark. Furthermore, the fact that Israel was defeated in this battle did not change the views of the characters regarding the intimate relationship between Yhwh and the Ark. As we have seen, the wife of Phinehas mourns the capture of the Ark as though Yhwh himself had been exiled. If the defeat of the Israelites did not convince the characters themselves that Yhwh was not present in the Ark, what reason do we have to think that it would convince the narrative audience of this?

Let us return to consider the supposedly disreputable identity of the characters who uphold the Zion-Sabaoth theology in the Ark Narrative. Sommer asserts: “In short, for our Deuteronomistic narrator, the Zion-Sabaoth or *kabod* theology is the theology of a

hated enemy and of a corrupt and discredited priestly house."[229] Although Eli and the wife of Phinehas may be regarded as members of a corrupt priestly house, nonetheless their portrayal in 1 Samuel 4 is largely sympathetic. In the words of Rost, "When the dying cry of Eli's daughter-in-law is 'The glory has departed from Israel!', it is not just grief that forces this cry from her lips but her piety and a fervent love of her country."[230] As for the "hated enemy": The Philistines do make some inaccurate statements about Israelite theology and history here, and perhaps we can infer from this that the author intended them to appear comically foolish. But again, as the following chapters show, the Philistines were right to fear the Ark as holy. Even if the Ark did not spread plagues among the Egyptians in the wilderness, its presence certainly plagued the Philistines. Moreover, in his analysis, Sommer fails to mention the Israelites of Beth-Shemesh, who also clearly regard Yhwh and the Ark as closely intertwined. It is more difficult to claim that these proponents of the Yhwh-Sabaoth theology would be objectionable figures for an Israelite audience.

Sommer concedes that the bulk of the Ark Narrative appears to contradict his thesis: "Even though 1 Samuel 4 mocks the idea that God is really in the ark or on it, the narrative goes on to show that the ark is mysteriously powerful."[231] Since the mockery that Sommer claims to detect in 1 Samuel 4 is at best only implicit, however, it would be more prudent to regard the narrative as a whole as confirming the view that God is present in the Ark.

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[229] Ibid., 105.

[230] Rost, *Succession*, 20.

[231] Ibid., 106.

Earlier in his book, Sommer criticizes those scholars who interpret Priestly literature within a narrow historical context: "Many studies of divine presence in P begin with an assertion that P was written or completed some time after 586 (an assertion with which many, though not all, scholars agree). These studies then move on to find a reading of P that allegedly fits this time period. In studies such as these … a speculative dating of the text determines the text's interpretation."[232] Sommer judiciously asserts that it would be preferable to interpret the Priestly literature on its own terms rather than analyzing it exclusively according to a debated system of dating. But Sommer's reading of the Ark Narrative falls prey to a similar fallacy. Although he does not presuppose a specific dating for the text, his interpretation is determined by the assumption that the theology upheld in the Ark Narrative must be classically Deuteronomic. Sommer acknowledges evidence that points to a dominant the Zion-Sabaoth theology here, but then labors to show that this theology is in fact being mocked by its treatment in the narrative. In other words, he notes that the theology on display in 1 Samuel 4–6 does not appear to fit the Deuteronomic view, but then he doggedly attempts to make it fit anyway! In short, Sommer tries to force a Deuteronomic reading onto the Ark Narrative, presumably because of its location in the book of Samuel. In this case, it appears that a rigid source critical perspective, rather than a rigid dating scheme, is impairing his interpretation.

Although Sommer's interpretation of the Ark Narrative may not be persuasive, the fluidity model he outlines in his book is useful for understanding the close connection between Yhwh and the Ark that is evident in 1–2 Samuel. When we "interviewed" the characters of the Ark Narrative regarding the relationship between Yhwh and the Ark, we

[232] Ibid., 96.

were essentially asking whether they conceived Yhwh and the Ark as identical or not. But the view of divine nature upheld within the fluidity model might allow us to circumvent this seemingly unavoidable binary. The Ark may be Yhwh in the same sense that the man who visited Abraham was Yhwh, or the opponent of Jacob was God. In these instances, the deity is conceived as being present in physical form, and yet he is not limited to this body or identity. Similarly, Sommer has pointed out that in the Zion-Sabaoth theology, Yhwh may be perceived as dwelling simultaneously in earth and in heaven. As an example, he cites Psalm 76, which first states unequivocally that God has made his home in Zion (v. 3 [2]), but then declares that the deity judges from heaven (v. 9 [8]).[233]

Sommer points out that the fluidity model as outlined in the Hebrew Bible is not unprecedented in the ancient Near East. In fact, this concept of divinity shares much in common with ancient Mesopotamian and Canaanite ideas regarding the shifting divine presence and the intimate relationship between gods and cultic objects. In particular, the cultic statue of a god was perceived as representing that god so accurately that the identity of the god and the object became intertwined.

The Ark of Yhwh as Divine Image

Starting with M. Delcor,[234] several modern scholars have argued that the Ark of Yhwh functions as the Israelite equivalent of a cultic statue or divine image, particularly in 1

[233] Ibid., 98.

[234] M. Delcor, "Jahweh et Dagon ou le Jahwisme face à la religion des Philistins, d'après 1 Sam. V," *VT* 14 (1964): 136–54.

Samuel 4–6.[235] Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts take up the idea of the Ark as a divine image in their important book, *The Hand of the Lord*. As Miller and Roberts show, it was not uncommon for ancient Near Eastern warriors to bring a statue of their god to the battlefield, with the expectation that the god's physical presence would help grant them victory.[236] Furthermore, the group that won the battle would customarily capture the statue of the opposing god, along with taking human captives. Many ancient Assyrian and Hittite sources attest that statues of defeated gods would be dedicated to the victorious god and were often kept in the temple of that god. For example, after a military victory against Sugi, the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser I (r. 1114–1076 BCE) declares:

> I conquered the land of Sugi in its length and breadth and brought out twenty-five of their gods, their spoil, their goods, and their possessions … At that time I presented the twenty-five gods of those lands, which I had captured with my hand and had taken away as gifts to the temple of Belit … and (to the temples) of Anu and Adad, and the Assyrian Ishtar.[237]

In the Neo-Assyrian period, a statement from King Adad Nirari II (r. 911–891 BCE) indicates that he treated the gods of his conquered enemy in a similar manner: "Their gods I placed before Assur, my lord, as gifts."[238] The treatment of the Ark of Yhwh as outlined in 1 Samuel 4–6 fits this pattern. As we have seen, after being captured in battle,

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[235] Other scholars who have dealt with the Ark as a divine image in 1–2 Samuel in light of comparative material include Franz Schickelberger, *Die Ladeerzählungen des ersten Samuel-Buches, Eine literaturwissenschaftliche und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung*, FB 7 (Würzburg: Echter, 1973), 149, 181–86; and Antony Campbell, *The Ark Narrative*, 179–91.

[236] For primary texts indicating that statues of Mesopotamian gods were consulted and taken into battle, see the Old Babylonian Mari letters: Dominique Charpin et al., ed., *Archives épistolaires de Mari*, ARM 26 (Paris: Recherche sur les civilisations, 1988), 2:147–48; Jean-Marie Durand, ed., *Archives épistolaires de Mari*, ARM 26 (Paris: Recherche sur les civilisations, 1988), 1:186.

[237] D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), 1:80 (cited by Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, p. 91 n. 75).

[238] Ibid., 1:117. For more examples from Hittite sources describing this custom, see Bedřich Hrozný, *KBo* 10, 1:4–6, 18–20.

the Ark is taken away by the victorious enemy and deposited in the temple of the Philistine god, Dagon (1 Sam 5:1–2).

Even apart from the fact that the Ark was treated as a divine image in this narrative, there are ways in which the Ark of Yhwh resembles Mesopotamian cultic statues. First, as we have demonstrated in this chapter, the identity of the deity and the Ark are difficult to disentangle throughout 1–2 Samuel. We find a similar merging of identity between gods and their cultic statues in ancient Near Eastern literature; as C. L. Seow notes, "divine images in Mesopotamia were not always called statues, they were regularly referred to as 'gods.' Alternatively, the name of the god or goddess may be mentioned where the image of the deity is meant."[239] But in Mesopotamian literature as well, it is not accurate to assume that a cultic statue was regarded as being wholly identical with the represented deity. Despite biblical polemics that mock foreign nations for worshiping wood and stone as gods,[240] the way these nations regarded the relationship between deities and matter was more complex. In the introduction to their edited volume *Idol Anxiety*, Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft include a helpful discussion in which they show that gods and cultic statues were never fully conflated in ancient Mesopotamia:

> Of course, even if the Mesopotamians mean the cult-object itself to establish the presence of the divine, we cannot say that the cult-object ever became fully coterminous with the divine. The king Nabû-apla-iddina, in the previous story of remaking a destroyed image of Shamash, could undertake such a refashioning precisely because the destruction of the Shamash image had not actually entailed the destruction of Shamash. The text in fact states that the king has the ritual

[239] C. L. Seow, "Ark of the Covenant," *ABD* 1:386–93, at 387.

[240] These polemics are especially prominent in Second Isaiah. See, e.g., Isaiah 44 and 46.

> performed on the cult-object Shamash "before Shamash." Since Shamash comprises the audience of the *mīs pî*, we cannot say that the cult-object Shamash simply is Shamash. At one and the same time, Shamash is the cult-object of the *mīs pî* and a separately existing entity that stands at a distance from the *mīs pî*, one that can watch over the rite and the object it consecrates.[241]

But even if the god did not become coterminous with the cultic statue as a result of the *mīs pî* ritual, the deity was nonetheless conceived as being alive somehow within the cultic object. So too, in the Ark Narrative, Yhwh appears to animate his Ark, responding to sensory stimulation as experienced by the "body" of this object.[242] The supernatural origin of the Ark as outlined in Exodus 25 and Deuteronomy 10 is also consistent with the creation of divine images as described in Mesopotamian literature. In the biblical texts, the Ark might have been physically constructed by Bezalel (Exodus 37) or Moses (Deuteronomy 10), but the blueprint for this special piece of cultic furniture comes from the deity. In some sense, then, the Ark may be regarded as having been built by Yhwh himself. Mesopotamian texts insist that cultic statues were born in heaven, and were not really fashioned by human hands. To emphasize this point, the human craftsmen who made the statues underwent a ceremony at the end of the *mīs pî* where they flung their tools into the river and symbolically cut off their hands. They would then chant: "I did not make it; I swear I did not make it; I did not make it; I swear I did not make it," explicitly renouncing their role as creators of these holy objects.[243]

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[241] Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft, eds., *Idol Anxiety* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 7.

[242] David Wright offers an erudite discussion of sensory stimulation in relation to the Ark in his article, "Music and Dance in 2 Samuel 6," *JBL* 121 (2002): 201–25.

[243] For a theoretical discussion of this ritual, see Ellenbogen and Tugendhaft, *Idol Anxiety*, 1–2; a detailed account of primary sources related to the *Mīs Pî* as a whole may be found in Christopher Walker and

Concerning the idea that the Ark functioned as a divine image in ancient Israel, one might object that, unlike cultic statues of gods, the Ark is not shaped anthropomorphically. This objection may be addressed in several ways. First, some scholars believe that the form of the Ark did in fact include anthropomorphic elements. Raanan Eichler, for instance, has recently argued that the cherubim of the Ark's cover were shaped like winged humans, instead of winged four-legged creatures as has generally been assumed.[244] Other scholars surmise that the Ark may have at one point contained an anthropomorphic statue of the deity.[245] In ancient Egypt, public processions of the gods were regularly held during which the statue of the god was concealed within a sacred bark: "Prozessionen sind der Höhepunkt ägyptischer Götterfest, die sichtbare Manifestation des Gottes durch sein Erscheinen im Prozessionsbild, d.h. in der Prozessionsbarke mit dem Schrein, in dem die Kultstatue verborgen ist."[246] Recently, Scott B. Noegel has argued that the biblical conception of the Ark is so similar to ancient Egyptian customs involving the sacred bark that it is likely to have developed under Egyptian influence.[247]

Michael Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual*, SAALT 1 (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001).

[244] Raanan Eichler, "Cherub: A History of Interpretation," *Biblica* 96 (2015): 26–38.

[245] Bernd Schipper recently suggested this possibility in response to a paper I presented at a conference held at Hebrew University, "Evolving Textualities: Sacred Writing through the Ages" (June 16, 2016). I owe him thanks for the following reference.

[246] Rainer Stadelmann, "Prozessionen," in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, ed. Wolfgang Helck and Eberhard Otto, 7 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1984), 4:1160–64.

[247] Scott B. Noegel, "The Egyptian Origin of the Ark of the Covenant," in *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, ed. Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H. C. Propp, QMHSS (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2015), 223–42.

If we limit ourselves to biblical descriptions of the Ark's form, however, we might consider classifying the Ark of Yhwh as a non-anthropomorphic divine image. As we have already discussed in relation to Nergal's chair in chapter 2, certain objects affiliated with deities were also granted divine status in ancient Mesopotamian texts. In her essay, "Blessings from a Crown, Offerings to a Drum,"[248] Barbara N. Porter offers a fascinating discussion of non-anthropomorphic representations of deities in Mesopotamia. She notes a variety of non-anthropomorphic objects that are marked by the determinative DINGIR in Mesopotamian records, which indicates these items were considered to belong to the same category as gods. Such objects include beds, thrones, harps, chariots, and weapons.[249] Often these objects are identified as belonging to a particular god, which helps to explain their divine status. Yet there is also evidence that these items were considered to be divine in their own right. For instance, offerings were sometimes made to the objects themselves, not only to the gods to whom they belonged. As Porter summarizes: "In the Old Babylonian period, beer was offered on one occasion at Nippur both to the god Ninurta and to two thrones. In the Neo-Babylonian period, a chariot belonging to the god Anu received daily offerings in Uruk of sheep, lambs, turtledoves, duck and geese, in amounts equal to those presented to important anthropomorphic gods of that city."[250] Records of these types of offerings indicate the widespread significance of such divine beings throughout Mesopotamian history.

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[248] Barbara N. Porter, "Blessings from a Crown, Offerings to a Drum: Were There Non-Anthropomorphic Deities in Ancient Mesopotamia?" in *What Is a God? Anthropomorphic and Non-Anthropomorphic Aspects of Deity in Ancient Mesopotamia*, ed. Barbara N. Porter (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 153–94.

[249] Porter, "Blessings from a Crown," 6.

[250] Ibid., 168.

Moreover, the food offerings presented to these objects corroborate their status as living beings, since only then would they be capable of savoring such sacrifices.[251] Other descriptions of non-anthropomorphic divine objects demonstrate that they were frequently regarded as active beings with their own agency.

The Ark of the Covenant as presented in 1–2 Samuel shares much in common with certain supernatural objects as described in these Mesopotamian texts. Unlike the statue of Dagon, which had a head and hands like a human being (as we see in 1 Sam 5:3–4), the form of the Ark appears to be non-anthropomorphic. As the throne of Yhwh, the Ark falls into the category of divine furniture. Although the divine determinative does not exist in ancient Hebrew, the Ark is given special attention when it is treated in biblical literature. In Priestly texts, the Ark and other furniture for the Tabernacle are described in elaborate detail, first when Yhwh gives instructions for how to build the furniture in Exodus 25–27, and again in Exodus 36–38, when the actual construction is described. As Gary A. Anderson has observed, "Mesopotamian scribes could mark temple appurtenances as divine with a DINGIR-sign; the Bible did so by way of repetition."[252]

The tales of the Ark's journeys in 1–2 Samuel may be compared to the accounts of the Assyrian state treasurer serving under Sargon II (721–705 BCE), who was in charge of transporting a pair of beds by boat to the temple in Assur, King Sargon's capital. We have two letters in which the official anxiously describes the details of his

[251] Ibid., 188.

[252] Gary A. Anderson, "Towards a Theology of the Tabernacle and Its Furniture," in *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity*, ed. Ruth Clements and Daniel R. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 161–94, at 162.

trip to the king; in both letters, he reassures King Sargon that he is treating the beds with utmost care, staying on the boat to keep watch over them at all times. In the second letter, the treasurer informs the king: "As long as the bed is aboard, regular sheep offerings are being made in front of it."[253] Porter observes the significance of these offerings: "Regular sheep offerings (UDU.*dariu*) are otherwise attested as being presented in Assyria to the great gods Assur, Nabu, and Marduk; their presentation to the bed in this instance appears to mark it not only as divine, but as a god of considerable prestige."[254] Although the beds may have belonged to an important god, at no point does the treasurer express trepidation concerning the divine owner of the beds; rather "it is the bed itself that is solicitously escorted and placated with its own offerings…What the letters reveal is a vague fearfulness and sense of awe, a feeling that if you should treat these beds in the wrong way, bad things will happen."[255]

As we have seen in the accounts of the ark in 1–2 Samuel, bad things *did* happen when the Ark of Yhwh was upset. Like the Mesopotamian beds, the Ark was also being escorted to a capital city under the supervision of King David in 2 Samuel 6 when Uzzah touched it and was struck dead beside the Ark. If the beds were anything like the throne of Yhwh, the state treasurer of Assyria was right to be anxious about conducting them. Just as the Assyrian official was careful to make regular offerings in front of the beds, David also appears to have sacrificed an ox and a fatted calf after every six steps taken by

[253] Porter, "Blessings from a Crown," 193.

[254] Ibid.

[255] Ibid.

those carrying the Ark in his second attempt to transport the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:13).[256] By contrast, there is no mention of sacrifices made during the Ark's first journey; perhaps the constant slaughter during the second procession served to mollify the Ark of Yhwh, preventing the divine presence housed therein from striking out against the humans who transported this dangerous object.

Because of these affinities between the Ark of Yhwh and Mesopotamian cultic statue, I will proceed to consider the Ark as divine image in the following chapter. Whereas in this chapter we have examined the relationship between Yhwh and the Ark as portrayed in the Ark Narrative and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, in the next chapter I will turn to consider the characterization of the Ark in 1–2 Samuel and will assess the text from a theological perspective.

[256] Miller and Roberts compare the procession of the ark to Jerusalem to Assurbanipal's return of Marduk's statue from Assur to Babylon: "Just as Assurbanipal's army participated in the return of Marduk to his new sanctuary, so David's army participated in the return of the ark of Yahweh. Just as Marduk's journey was accompanied by music and rejoicing, so was the ark's. Moreover, just as the Assyrians offered sacrifices every double mile from the quay of Assur to the quay of Babylon, so David offered an ox and a fatling after every six steps" (*The Hand of the Lord*, 16–17).

CHAPTER 4

THE TAMING OF THE ARK

In chapter 2, we analyzed the biblical book of Joshua and the Mesopotamian myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*—two conquest narratives in which a warrior god proves his dominance by breaking through normally unbreakable boundaries. It is certainly beneficial to have a superhuman warrior fighting on one's behalf in situations of conquest and warfare in general. But warriors can be difficult and dangerous personalities. In this chapter, we will focus on a pair of texts that feature the same warring gods: the Ark Narrative of 1–2 Samuel and the Babylonian poem *Erra and Ishum* (Erra being another name for Nergal). Whereas in the book of Joshua and in *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, the violent energy of Yhwh and Nergal is directed strategically to accomplish a desirable goal (i.e., the conquest of Canaan and the Netherworld, respectively), in the Ark Narrative and *Erra and Ishum*, the deity's raging energy lashes out indiscriminately, with fatal consequences for those who get in his way.

The divine violence that issues forth from the Ark of Yhwh is experienced as inscrutable and disturbing by the characters of the Ark Narrative. I will argue that these texts do not represent a justification or rationalization of divine violence; rather, they grapple with a timeless conundrum, the vulnerability of humans to evil. It is only that, in the Ark Narrative, as in *Erra and Ishum*, the evil inflicted upon defenseless humans does not come from some external enemy, but from their own revered deity.

In Defense of the Deity: Miller and Roberts

In their monograph, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel*,[257] Miller and Roberts offer a stimulating discussion of the Ark Narrative in light of Mesopotamian texts that describe the capture of divine images by enemy troops. Their goal in this comparative project is to ascertain how the capture of the Ark may have been interpreted by the ancient Israelites. Would the Israelites have concluded from this disaster that their god was not quite as strong as the god of their enemies? Or might they have believed that their god abandoned them due to displeasure at their behavior? The comparative analysis of Miller and Roberts yields yet another way of understanding the situation: a god might willfully permit his own capture in order to carry out a mission in enemy territory.

In several intriguing cuneiform texts, the captured statue of a god is given a voice and explains the situation from his own perspective. The clearest example of this phenomenon occurs in a Babylonian text known as the "Prophecy of Marduk."[258] Here the deity recounts his experience of being captured by the Hittite ruler Mursilis I, who sacked Babylon in 1531 BCE. Marduk claims that it was his idea to travel to Hatti in order to promote trade between that region and Babylon: "I gave the command. I went to the land of Hatti. I questioned Hatti. The throne of my Anu-ship I set up within it. I dwelt

[257] Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel*, JHNES (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

[258] For a full scholarly edition of this text, see Rykle Borger, "Gott Marduk und Gott-König Sulgi als Propheten. Zwei prophetische Texte," *BO* 28 (1971): 3–24.

within it for 24 years, and I established within it the caravan trade of the Babylonians."[259] In light of our discussion of the Ark as Yhwh's throne, it is noteworthy that Marduk articulates his sovereignty in terms of establishing his divine throne in foreign territory. So too, Yhwh dominates the Philistine pentapolis through the presence of his Ark/throne in 1 Samuel 5–6.

Eventually, as a result of the Elamite campaign led by Nebuchadnezzar I, the statue of Marduk is reclaimed from foreign territory and taken back to his place in Babylon. The Prophecy of Marduk does not present the god as being grateful for his rescue; quite the contrary, it has Marduk boast that he is able to travel wherever he wants, at any time. In his words, "I am Marduk the great lord. I alone am lord of destinies and decisions. Who has taken this road? Wherever I went, from there I returned."[260] As in *Nergal and Ereshkigal* and the book of Joshua, where the male heroes display dominance through their border-crossing prowess, here too Marduk points to his unfettered mobility as evidence of his lordship. According to Miller and Roberts, such rhetoric was intended to reassure the defeated people that, despite appearances to the contrary, their god remained powerful and was busy working on their behalf in enemy territory.

Miller and Roberts argue that the Ark Narrative functions in a manner similar to the Prophecy of Marduk and other ancient Near Eastern accounts in which a god claims to have been captured on purpose. Although the biblical tale does not offer a first-person account of the capture from the deity's perspective, nonetheless Miller and Roberts believe the events of the narrative in 1 Samuel 4–6 effectively demonstrate that Yhwh

[259] Borger, "Gott Marduk," 5:13–19 (quoted in Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 12).

[260] Borger, "Gott Marduk," 7:18–21 (quoted in Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 12).

was in control of the situation all along. In their reading, Yhwh first allowed his Ark to be captured by the Philistines because he was angry at the sins of Israel's priests, Hophni and Phinehas. But then, lest anyone think the capture of the Ark signaled his subordination to the Philistine god, Yhwh proved his superiority by striking down Dagon in his own house and spreading plagues among the Philistines. In the view of Miller and Roberts, then, the overarching theological purpose of the Ark Narrative is to show that the warrior Yhwh is dominant:

> Thus we encounter at the heart of the narrative a primary image which binds all of its parts together—the defeat of Israel, the defeat of Dagon, and the defeat of the Philistines—and serves to demonstrate that the power of the divine warrior Yahweh is the key to what the narrative is really about. The might of Yahweh, manifest through his hand … is the thread that runs through the narrative, holding it together and conveying its intention.[261]

Against Rost, who sees 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 as constituting a literary unit, Miller and Roberts do not include 2 Samuel 6 in their analysis of the Ark Narrative. Rather, they assert that the events in 1 Samuel 4–6 must be read as a continuation of the narrative as told in 1 Samuel 1–3, which details the cultic sins of Hophni and Phinehas. In addition to excluding 2 Samuel 6 from their discussion, Miller and Roberts also choose to disregard the account of the disaster at Beth-Shemesh as told in the Masoretic Text. Instead, with many other interpreters, they opt for the version attested in the Septuagint, which is slightly more palatable. The LXX of 1 Sam 6:19 reads: Καὶ οὐκ ἠσμένισαν οἱ υἱοὶ Ιεχονιου ἐν τοῖς ἀνδράσιν Βαιθσαμυς, ὅτι εἶδαν κιβωτὸν κυρίου· καὶ ἐπάταξεν ἐν αὐτοῖς ἑβδομήκοντα ἄνδρας καὶ πεντήκοντα χιλιάδας ἀνδρῶν. καὶ ἐπένθησεν ὁ λαός, ὅτι ἐπάταξεν κύριος ἐν τῷ λαῷ πληγὴν μεγάλην σφόδρα. "But the sons of Jeconiah did not

[261] Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 49.

rejoice with the men of Beth-Shemesh when they saw the Ark of the Lord; so he struck down among them seventy men and fifty thousand men. And the people mourned because the Lord had caused a massive plague among the people." Although this explanation leaves us with more questions (who are the sons of Jeconiah, and why did they not rejoice?), the Septuagint at least provides a clear reason for the slaughter of a specific group of people. The sons of Jeconiah are slain because they did not rejoice with the residents of Beth-Shemesh at the return of the Ark. In the MT, by contrast, a multitude of townspeople die in what would appear to be an act of veneration before the Ark of Yhwh.

Miller and Roberts conclude that, "in this narrative we have an early theodicy, that is, the vindication of the ways of Yahweh. How does one account for the great defeat of the people of Yahweh and the loss of their central cultic symbol, the throne of the deity? The answer is given in this story. It was not the defeat of Yahweh, as it may have seemed. Rather, the whole thing was Yahweh's purpose."[262]

In the section that follows, I will outline the refutation of Miller and Roberts's literary analysis by Antony F. Campbell. I will begin, however, by offering some preliminary remarks in response to two of their theological claims—namely, that the narrative emphasizes Yhwh's might and that it serves as a theodicy. Among contemporary interpreters, the first point made by Miller and Roberts is hardly controversial: no one denies that the God of Israel exhibits dominance in this narrative. Their second point, on the other hand, is highly arguable and does not follow logically from the first. That is, the mere fact that the deity is dominant here does not mean he is

[262] Ibid., 73.

therefore vindicated. Or to put it somewhat differently: even if it can be shown that a god does something on purpose, this does not entail that the act is necessarily just. If Yhwh had only (or even primarily) targeted the enemies of Israel in this narrative, then the conclusions of Miller and Roberts would carry more weight. Such a tale might well have served the purpose that these authors attribute to the narrative: reassuring a defeated people that their captured god continues to work on their behalf, even in enemy territory. But although Yhwh succeeds in terrorizing the Philistines and dominating Dagon through his Ark, Yhwh also strikes thousands of Israelites dead at Beth-Shemesh, as well as in battle against the Philistines. The slaying of Hophni and Phinehas may represent an appropriate punishment for the house of Eli, but we might still wonder about the purpose of the other slaughter described in these chapters.

The number of casualties presented in 1 Samuel 4–6 is staggering. In the first battle against the Philistines, about four thousand Israelite soldiers are killed (1 Sam 4:2). The second battle is far worse; in the wake of this conflict, we are told that thirty thousand Israelites lie dead (1 Sam 4:10). We do not know how many Philistines perished as a result of plagues during the seven months the Ark circulated in the pentapolis, though the number should have been significant for the Philistines to have been so severely afflicted with the "panic of death" (מהומת־מות, 1 Sam 5:11) that they demand the Ark be expelled from their land. When the Ark returns to Israelite territory, another massive slaughter occurs. Fifty thousand and seventy residents of Beth-Shemesh are slain when they look at the Ark (1 Sam 6:19). Although the figure may be inflated due to

textual corruption,[263] still the narrative presents an enormous national catastrophe, with a total death count of 84,070 among the Israelites alone, apparently in a matter of months. Regardless of how many of their Philistine enemies may have also been slain by the hand of Yhwh, it would be difficult for the Israelites to claim these bloody months as a triumphant period, given their enormous losses. Unlike Marduk's explanation, no justification is given in our text for why Yhwh behaved in this way. Rather than serving as a vindication of Yhwh, as Miller and Roberts claim, then, the Ark Narrative appears to highlight Yhwh's unpredictable violence.

In the scenario as presented by Miller and Roberts, the return of the Ark to Beth-Shemesh should resemble the triumphal return of a warrior to his hometown. And in fact, the people do respond to the return of the Ark with great rejoicing. But whether the victims were seventy sullen sons of Jeconiah or many thousands of enthusiastic spectators, the Ark of Yhwh as portrayed in this text is like a celebrated warrior welcomed home only to slaughter in heaps those who attend his victory parade. It is a decidedly sinister conclusion. After this tragic event, the people of Beth-Shemesh cry out in despair: "Who can stand before Yhwh this holy god? And to whom shall he go up from upon us?" (1 Sam 6:20). From their horrified response, we see that the Israelites are just as anguished and mystified at the end of the story as they were at its beginning. The resulting picture is of a divine warrior gone berserk, not one who acts in a measured and judicious manner, as Miller and Roberts would have it.

[263] The MT provides two different figures in apposition: שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ חֲמִשִּׁים אֶלֶף אִישׁ, literally "seventy men, fifty thousand men." The absence of the conjunction between the two numbers is highly anomalous and seems to indicate a textual error or insertion. See chapter 3, note 30 for a fuller discussion.

Campbell vs. Miller and Roberts

In the 1970s, three significant monographs were published on the subject of the Ark Narrative. First to appear was Franz Schickelberger's *Die Ladeerzählungen des ersten Samuel-Buches, Eine literaturwissenschaftliche und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung* (1973).[264] Next came Campbell's substantive treatment, *The Ark Narrative (1 Sam 4–6; 2 Sam 6): A Form-Critical and Traditio-Historical Study* (1975).[265] Two years later, Miller and Roberts produced a slimmer volume on the subject, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel* (1977), the contents of which we have just summarized. In this work, Miller and Roberts critically appraise the studies of both Schickelberger and Campbell.[266]

After another two years, Campbell published an article in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*, "Yahweh and the Ark: A Case Study in Narrative" (1979), in which he offers a synopsis of the three monographs and defends his own interpretation against the critiques of Miller and Roberts.[267] Campbell's views on the Ark Narrative are rearticulated in his two subsequent commentaries on 1 Samuel (2003)[268] and 2 Samuel (2005).[269] This concentrated scholarly dialogue, particularly the exchange between Campbell on the one hand, and Miller and Roberts on the other, affords a helpful

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[264] Franz Schickelberger, *Die Ladeerzählungen des ersten Samuel-Buches, Eine literaturwissenschaftliche und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung*, FB 7 (Würzburg: Echter, 1973).

[265] Antony F. Campbell, *The Ark Narrative, 1 Sam 4–6, 2 Sam 6: A Form-Critical and Traditio-Historical Study*, SBLDS 16 (Cambridge, MA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1975).

[266] Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 1–10.

[267] Antony F. Campbell, "Yahweh and the Ark: A Case Study in Narrative," *JBL* 98 (1979): 31–43.

[268] Antony F. Campbell, *1 Samuel*, FOTL 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[269] Antony F. Campbell, *2 Samuel*, FOTL 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

perspective on the most salient issues involved in modern scholarly efforts to interpret the Ark Narrative.

As Campbell points out in his article, the three works share some commonalities. They all regard the narrative as theological, incorporate ancient Near Eastern materials in their analysis, and are concerned with delineating textual units. They also agree on the basic interpretation of a number of episodes within the Ark Narrative. But their views diverge with regard to the particular theological purpose, extent, and dating of the text.

Schickelberger rejects Rost's hypothesis but also does not believe that 1 Samuel 1–3 should be considered part of the literary unit. Focusing exclusively on 1 Samuel 4–6,[270] Schickelberger argues that the text is in essence a "catastrophe story" whose theological goal is to stress the importance of Yhwh's Ark, showing that the divine presence is indeed potently manifest in this object. Schickelberger sees the narrative as a corrective to Zion theology, in which the city of Jerusalem itself is regarded as the unassailable seat of divine presence. Because Zion theology is likely to have gained ground following the failed siege of Sennacherib against Jerusalem, Schickelberger believes the Ark Narrative may be dated to the same period—approximately 700 BCE.[271] As for the question of authorship, Schickelberger surmises that the Ark Narrative was developed and propagated by Northern Israelites from the vicinity of Shiloh who fled south to Jerusalem after the fall of the Northern kingdom around 720. This theory is

[270] More specifically, Schickelberger argues that 1 Samuel 4 (verses 1a[LXX]b, 2–4, 10–12, 13, 14b–18a, 19–21) constitutes an original, basically historical core around which the rest of the narrative in chapters 5–6 later developed (Schickelberger, *Ladeerzählungen*, 42, 70, 177).

[271] Schickelberger, *Ladeerzählungen*, 172–73, 211–34.

soundly confuted by Miller and Roberts, who call it "bizarre,"[272] and Campbell presents a strong case against other aspects of Schickelberger's analysis.[273]

In response to Miller and Roberts, who maintain that 1 Samuel 4–6 should be read as the logical conclusion of chapters 1–3, Campbell reasserts and strengthens Rost's hypothesis that 1 Samuel 4–6 and 2 Samuel 6 are integrally related to each other and do not presuppose 1 Samuel 1–3. Campbell summarizes the issue as follows: "The fundamental question is whether the anti-Elide text in chap. 2 is so formulated that it requires chap. 4 as its continuation; or conversely, whether the text of chap. 4 is so formulated that it requires the anti-Elide material as its introduction."[274] Campbell's answer to both questions would be "no." He begins by referring to Wellhausen's classic arguments against understanding 1 Samuel 1–6 as a literary unit[275] (i.e., the protagonist of chapters 1–3, Samuel, is not mentioned at all in 4–6, whereas the Ark is the central player in 4–6 but is only peripheral in 1–3). Campbell presents three basic reasons suggesting that the narrative integrity of 1 Samuel 1–3 does not hang on the events as described in chapters 4–6 and vice versa. First, contra Miller and Roberts,[276] he asserts that the fate of Hophni and Phinehas is not emphasized in chapter 4 but plays a remarkably insignificant role. Instead, the loss of the Ark is treated as the gravest misfortune to befall the

[272] Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 2–6, especially 3.

[273] See especially Campbell, "Yahweh and the Ark," 39.
[274] Campbell, "Yahweh and the Ark," 34.

[275] Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1899), 238.

[276] Miller and Roberts argue that Hophni and Phinehas are the primary focus of chapter 4: "The structurally significant role of Hophni and Phinehas can only be explained in light of the judgment of doom against the house of Eli in ch. 2. The intense interest in their death only makes sense in that context" (*Hand of the Lord*, 22). And yet Miller and Roberts also concede that both Eli and the wife of Phinehas appear to be far more concerned with the loss of the Ark than with the death of their sons and husband, respectively (ibid.).

Israelites; this catastrophe is not foretold in 1 Samuel 1–3. Nor are the deaths of Eli and the wife of Phinehas, or the Israelites' defeat by the Philistines.

Second, Campbell posits that, if the sum of the misfortunes in 1 Samuel 4 (including the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas) is to be regarded as a fulfillment of the prophecy against the house of Eli, we might expect a notice to this effect to appear in the text. Such statements occur quite frequently throughout the Hebrew Bible, and Campbell even points to another passage in the Deuteronomistic History, 1 Kgs 2:26–27, which explicitly indicates that Solomon's banishment of Abiathar is to be taken as the fulfillment of the prophecy against the priestly house of Eli:

ויגרֶשׁ שְׁלֹמֹה אֶת־אֶבְיָתָר מִהְיוֹת כֹּהֵן לַיהוָה לְמַלֹּא אֶת־דְּבַר יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר עַל־בֵּית עֵלִי בְּשִׁלֹה׃

"Solomon banned Abiathar from being a priest to Yhwh, in fulfillment of the word of Yhwh which he had spoken concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh" (1 Kgs 2:27). According to Campbell, the fact that no such notice appears in 1 Samuel 4 suggests that this is not the primary aim of the narrative. According to Miller and Roberts, by contrast, the fact that the sons of Eli die on the same day (1 Sam 4:11), as the man of God foretold in 1 Sam 2:34, provides clear evidence that the misfortunes described in 1 Samuel 4 must be viewed as a divine judgment against the nation for the corruption of their priests.[277]

Third and finally, Campbell observes that, if the national catastrophe recounted in 1 Samuel 4 is to be taken as a punishment for the sins of Hophni and Phinehas, such a punishment is wildly disproportionate to the crime. In his words, "The loss of the ark, two defeats, and the death of 34,000 men is a steep price to pay for the punishment of two

[277] "The proximity of the presentation of the fulfillment to the prophecy itself requires no additional comment" (Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 22).

or three errant priests."[278] He stresses that 1 Samuel 4 presents the disaster in national terms, whereas the judgment against the house of Eli in chapter 2 is formulated on an individual, or familial level. To bolster his contention that the misfortune in 1 Samuel 4 bespeaks Yhwh's disfavor towards the nation as a whole, Campbell refers to Psalm 78. This lengthy psalm includes a poetic retelling of the disaster described in 1 Samuel 4. Verses 60–61 state:

60 ויטשׁ מִשְׁכַּן שִׁלוֹ אֹהֶל שָׁכַן בָּאָדָם׃ **61** ויתן לִשְׁבִי עֻזּוֹ וְתִפְאַרְתּוֹ בְּיַד־צָר׃

He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh,
the tent of his dwelling among humans.
He gave over his strength to captivity,
and his splendor to the hand of the enemy. (Ps 78:60–61)

In the psalm these disasters, which culminate in divine abandonment, are presented as having resulted from the sins of the nation as a whole—namely, Yhwh was provoked to wrath by the Israelites' idolatry.[279] There is no mention of the corruption of Hophni and Phinehas as having instigated the national defeat.

If the national disaster did occur as a result of the sins of Hophni and Phinehas, however, it appears that the characters themselves are entirely unaware of this fact. After they suffer defeat on the battlefield, the bewildered Israelite elders ask, "Why has Yhwh

[278] Campbell, "Yahweh and the Ark," 35. Against this claim, Miller and Roberts assert that since the priests play an essential role in the national life, it is not unreasonable to expect that the entire nation should undergo collective punishment as a result of the trespasses of Hophni and Phinehas (*Hand of the Lord*, 22).

[279] Although we do not hear about Israelites worshiping other gods in the narrative that immediately precedes 1 Samuel 4–6, their idolatrous behavior is referred to just after the settlement of the Ark in Kiriath-jearim. In 1 Sam 7:3, the prophet Samuel reappears and instructs the Israelites to abandon their foreign gods, "the Baals and Astartes." According to 1 Sam 7:4, he people comply and devote themselves wholly to Yhwh.

struck us down today before the Philistines?" (1 Sam 4:3). Although the narrative gives no indication that the Israelites ever learn the answer to this question, Miller and Roberts believe that a sound interpretation of this tale must provide a reasonable explanation for their defeat.[280] Directing their criticism specifically towards Campbell, they declare: "Any analysis that leaves unanswered this key question, explicitly raised by the narrative itself, must be suspect."[281] But it seems that just the opposite might be claimed. Perhaps any analysis that puts forth a definitive answer to this question, which is left conspicuously unanswered in the narrative, should be regarded with suspicion. We would do well to consider the possibility that the question is intended to linger and haunt us, just as it remained unanswered for the ancient Israelites.[282] The challenge for interpreters, then, may be to preserve certain textual questions instead of hastily whisking them away by means of self-satisfied explanations.

In sum, Campbell does not deny that in the current redaction as represented in the MT of 1 Samuel 4–6, there are links to the preceding material in chapters 1–3. But he stands firm in his conviction that the two blocks of text did not originally stand as one

[280] Other explanations for the Israelite defeat have been offered by various scholars. Klaas A. D. Smelik, for example, asserts that Yhwh struck down the Israelites "because the Israelites took the initiative in attacking the Philistines without waiting for a divine command. In the author's ideology, this is not the right way for Israel to wage war against enemies: one has to wait for YHWH's initiative and approval" (Klaas A. D. Smelik, "Hidden Messages in the Ark Narrative: An Anaylsis of 1 Samuel iv–vi and II Samuel vi," in *Converting the Past: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Moabite Historiography*, OtSt 28 [Leiden: Brill, 1992], 35–58, at 45).

[281] Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*, 8.

[282] By contrast, in his article, "'Through Those Who Are Near to Me, I Will Show Myself Holy': Nadab and Abihu and Apophatic Theology" (*CBQ* 77 [2015]: 1–19), Gary A. Anderson goes so far as to take it for granted that the audience of the Ark Narrative knows exactly why Yhwh acts so violently in these tales. With regard to the question of the Israelite elders in 1 Sam 4:3 as to why Yhwh defeated them in battle against the Philistines, Anderson states: "The reader knows the answer: the sins of Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli. But the elders do not share this knowledge" (3). It is somewhat ironic that in an article on apophatic theology, Anderson asserts the reader's knowledge of Yhwh's motivation with such certainty.

piece; according to Campbell, the narrative thrust of 1 Samuel 4–6 is not retrospective but rather points forward to the settlement of the Ark that would finally occur in 2 Samuel 6. In the conclusion of his article, Campbell notes the limitations of a certain type of literary-critical methodology: "It is important to stress that the reasons for maintaining the unity of the Ark Narrative do not rest exclusively on matters of vocabulary, or even style and content, but extend also to the theological outlook and the understanding of the intervention of God in the affairs of men. … Within the narrative, and exclusive to it, there is the central concern for the symbol of the ark as revelatory of Yahweh's power and purpose."[283]

As Campbell observes, the way biblical scholars have construed the broader meaning of the Ark Narrative is often largely dependent on how they define the boundaries of the text itself. Rost and Campbell advocate reading 1 Samuel 4–6 together with 2 Samuel 6; this textual configuration deemphasizes the motive of the deity and instead places a focus on the eventual settling of the Ark in Jerusalem under King David (2 Samuel 6), which, according to Campbell, signals the beginning of a new political era. By contrast, the delineation of Miller and Roberts facilitates an understanding of the narrative as a tale of sin and punishment. In arguing that 1 Samuel 4–6 presupposes 1 Samuel 2:12ff, Miller and Roberts wish to emphasize that the violent behavior of Yhwh is a righteous response to human sin. In opting for the Septuagint version of the slaughter at Beth-Shemesh, the authors exculpate Yhwh for the seemingly indiscriminate killing as presented in the MT. Since they do not include 2 Samuel 6 within the boundaries of the Ark Narrative, Miller and Roberts manage to avoid addressing yet another problematic

[283] Campbell, "Yahweh and the Ark," 40.

incident: the slaying of Uzzah. Having dismissed these disturbing episodes, the authors flatten the theological landscape and make it conform to a familiar pattern: Israel sins, God punishes them, but eventually he defeats their enemies, thereby proving his power. Miller and Roberts thus glibly answer every harrowing question posed by the characters, stripping uncertainty and allowing little room to doubt Yhwh's justice. In so doing, Miller and Roberts imagine they have offered a satisfying theological explanation. In my view, however, the strength of their work lies in its skillful presentation of interesting comparative material, not in its theological insights.

Although it is difficult to deny that one's understanding of a story may depend on how that story is defined, the scholarly obsession with delineating the exact verses that constitute an original Ark Narrative is something of an interpretive red herring. All too often a scholar will busy himself with trimming; when he proudly serves up a tidy slice of the narrative, he considers his work to be finished, believing the correct interpretation will follow naturally from the simplified version of the story he has presented. Such a methodology appears to be based on the idea that there is only one valid interpretation for any particular text. I am not suggesting we neglect the complex historical process of literary growth that is evident in the Ark Narrative and other biblical texts. Nor do I advocate the idea that any one of the myriad possible interpretations of a narrative is just as valid as the next. Rather, it is important to appreciate that any interpretation of a particular textual unit may also be assessed against the broader literary landscape in which it is currently embedded. Perhaps, as Miller and Roberts suggest, the sins of Eli's sons did set off the wrath of Yhwh as described in 1 Samuel 4–6. Nevertheless, it can still be cogently argued that the purpose of the narrative is not to present a clear-cut tale of sin

and punishment, but to highlight the sinister course of divine wrath when it is unleashed against human society.

Did the Ark of Yhwh Act according to Pre-Established Rules?

As we have noted above, Miller and Roberts do not deal with the MT's presentation of the events at Beth-Shemesh, nor do they address the disturbing outburst against Uzzah as recounted in 2 Samuel 6. By disregarding or downplaying these scenes of divine violence, they are able to argue that the God of Israel acted in a justifiable manner throughout the Ark Narrative. Scholars who have given these episodes due consideration, however, must account for Yhwh's behavior differently. One common way in which interpreters have sought to defend Yhwh's behavior in these instances is to argue that Uzzah and the Israelites at Beth-Shemesh violated a previously established rule concerning the way the Ark should be treated. We will consider such assessments of these two episodes below.

1 Samuel 6 (Beth-Shemesh): The Ark Must Not Be Seen

The most common reason given for the mass slaying at Beth-Shemesh as described in the MT is that the people should not have looked upon (or into) the Ark. In 1 Sam 6:19, the act of seeing is described with the words: ראו בארון יהוה. Here the letter *bet*, a preposition that frequently means "in," is inserted before the object of seeing, i.e., the Ark. The more standard way of expressing "they saw the Ark" in Hebrew narrative would be to use the definite direct object marker, *'et*, in this position. Some interpreters have taken the

preposition to indicate that the Beth-Shemites were struck down because they impiously sought to gaze into the Ark, presumably lifting its cover and peering inside. As Brueggemann explains the situation, "Some Israelites violate the ark, either by looking in it (v. 19) or by refusing to celebrate (so the Septuagint)."[284] But already in 1913, such a reading of the phrase was refuted by S. R. Driver. As he demonstrated, "ראה ב does not mean *to look into*, but *to look on* or *at*, sometimes with satisfaction and pleasure, at other times with interest and attention."[285]

Apart from 1 Sam 6:19 itself, the idea that humans should not look upon the Ark is based primarily on instructions articulated within Priestly literature. In Leviticus 16, for example, the inherent danger of Yhwh's Ark is highlighted:

> ויאמר יהוה אל־משׁה דבר אל־אהרן אחיך ואל־יבא בכל־עת אל־הקדשׁ מבית לפרכת אל־פני הכפרת
> אשׁר על־הארן ולא ימות כי בענן אראה על־הכפרת׃

"Yhwh said to Moses: Tell Aaron your brother that he should not come at just any time to the sanctuary within the curtain, to the place in front of the cover that is upon the Ark, lest he die. For I appear in the cloud over the cover" (Lev 16:2).

The book of Numbers contains Priestly regulations that are more specifically related to seeing or touching the Ark and other holy objects. Here we are told that the Kohathites, a branch of Levites (Kohath being the second son of Levi), were commissioned for the purpose of carrying the Ark and the other tabernacle appurtenances

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[284] Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 43. In many of the English Bible translations that do not substitute the LXX version at 1 Sam 6:19, the phrase is rendered as "they looked into the ark" (e.g., JPS, NIV, ASV).

[285] S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 58.

on their shoulders.[286] And yet, according to Numbers 4, the Kohathites were forbidden to touch or look upon these items. How could this be possible? The text explains that, before the Kohathites set about transporting the holy objects, another priestly group—Aaron and his sons—would come and cover these objects with fine leather and cloths of various colors (Num 4:5–15). The Ark itself was to be shrouded within three different layers: first, the "screening curtain" (פרכת המסך), then fine leather, and at last a blue cloth was to be spread over the Ark before its poles were inserted for carrying (Num 4:5–6). According to this account, every appurtenance was either lifted with poles (as was the Ark) or loaded onto a special "carrying frame" (המוט). Only then were the Kohathites permitted to approach and take up the tabernacle furnishings. None of the holy objects were to be directly seen or touched by the Kohathites (or presumably, anyone else), lest they die. This is made explicit in verses 15 and 20:

וכלה אהרן־ובניו לכסת את־הקדש ואת־כל־כלי הקדש בנסע המחנה ואחרי־כן יבאו בני־קהת לשאת ולא־יגעו אל־הקדש ומתו

"Aaron and his sons will finish covering the sanctuary and all the appurtenances of the sanctuary when the camp sets out. Afterward, the sons of Kohath shall come to carry them. But they shall not touch anything holy, lest they die" (Num 4:15).

ולא־יבאו לראות כבלע את־הקדש ומתו

[286] That the holy objects were intended to be borne specifically on the shoulders of the Kohathites is stated in Num 7:9.

"But they must not come to see—even for an instant[287]—anything holy, lest they die" (Num 4:20).[288]

These Priestly texts might be adduced as evidence for the "rule" that—with the possible exception of Aaron's descendants—anyone who ever sees or touches the Ark would die instantaneously, as did Uzzah and the unfortunate onlookers at Beth-Shemesh. From this we might deduce that to look upon or touch the Ark would be considered a sin. But from other biblical texts, we might glean that seeing the Ark was not regarded as sinful, or as an exclusively priestly prerogative.[289] Later on in the book of Samuel, in fact, King David declares it a sign of Yhwh's favor to let him look upon the Ark. When the king is forced to flee Jerusalem after the revolt of his son Absalom, the priests Zadok and Abiathar follow him with the Ark. But David commands Zadok to take the Ark back to Jerusalem, reasoning,

ויאמר המלך לצדוק השׁב את־ארון האלהים העיר אם־אמצא חן בעיני יהוה והשׁבני והראני אתו ואת־נוהו׃

[287] The phrase I have translated as "even for an instant," כבלע, literally means "as (or: at the time of) swallowing." Presumably, this is to indicate a very brief period of time; cf. the English phrase "in the blink of an eye." Other interpreters, such as Rashi, have taken the phrase to refer to the wrapping of the holy objects, since the verb "to swallow" can mean "to engulf," as these objects were wrapped up within their coverings. According to such an understanding, the verse might be translated, "They must not come to watch during the wrapping of the sanctuary…"

[288] In both verses, I have translated הקדשׁ, lit. "the holiness" as "anything holy." In some cases, such as the first occurrence of the noun in verse 15, הקדשׁ appears to refer specifically to the sanctuary. Here, the sense seems to be that the Kohathites are not to touch or look upon any part of the sanctuary mentioned in the preceding list (vv. 5–14).

[289] Because David is said to have worn a linen ephod in 2 Sam 6:14, however, it has been suggested that the king may at times take on the role of a priest. As Alter notes, "The wearing of an ephod surely underscores the fact that in the procession of the Ark into Jerusalem David is playing the roles of both priest and king—a double service not unknown in the ancient Near East (compare Melchisedek in Genesis 14)" (Robert Alter, *The David Story*, 227).

"If I find favor in the eyes of Yhwh, he will bring me back and let me see it and its abode" (2 Sam 15:25).[290]

There may have always been some danger involved in approaching the holy Ark, but nevertheless David himself considers viewing the Ark to be a desirable form of veneration. As Gary A. Anderson comments, "Favor with the deity will be symbolized not only by restoration to his kingdom but by being granted the privilege of *seeing* the Ark."[291]

To interpreters who seek to offer a logical explanation for the incident at Beth-Shemesh, or those who prefer to substitute the more "reasonable" Septuagint account, Campbell offers a keen rebuttal:

> The difficulty with any rendering that makes the disaster intelligible is that it then nullifies the question in v. 20: "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God?" … If the answer is clear—those can stand before the ark who keep the liturgical or cultic rules about not looking into the ark or who have an appropriately worshipful attitude—then it would be the height of stupidity to banish the ark to Kiriath-Jearim. But the ark is banished and the text is not about stupidity. With unintelligibility and mystery preserved, it becomes clear that the ark is not yet the occasion for blessing in Israel; it is dangerous to have it around.[292]

2 Samuel 6 (Uzzah): The Ark Must Not Be Touched

After the Ark has been confined in the house of Abinadab for several decades, King David attempts to escort the holy object to his capital city of Jerusalem. As recounted in 2

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[290] I have translated the 3ms pronoun אתו "it" here, as referring to the Ark. But the pronoun could also be understood as referring to Yhwh himself (so "him and his abode").

[291] Gary A. Anderson, "Towards a Theology of the Tabernacle and Its Furniture," in *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity*, ed. Ruth Clements and Daniel R. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 161–94, at 166.

[292] Campbell, *1 Samuel*, 81.

Samuel 6, the Ark is loaded onto a new cart led by the sons of Abinadab, Ahio and Uzzah. The procession of the Ark is accompanied with great fanfare: the king and a joyous throng of Israelites dance in front of the Ark, serenaded by songs and a host of musical instruments. Along the way, however, an accident occurs; the oxen stumble, and when Uzzah reaches out his hand—apparently in an attempt to prevent the Ark from falling—Yhwh's anger flares up, and he strikes Uzzah dead beside the Ark. Just as the divine outburst turned rejoicing into mourning at Beth-Shemesh, so too this supernatural assault against Uzzah halts the merry parade. David's anger at the incident suggests that he considered Yhwh's act to be unjust (2 Sam 6:8). Afraid to bring the Ark to his capital city, David again deposits the Ark in the house of an individual, Obed-edom the Gittite. After three months, when David learns that the household of Obed-edom has been blessed by the presence of the Ark, the king ventures another attempt to bring it to Jerusalem. This time, the trip is successful, and after much boisterous dancing and sacrifices, David places the Ark in the tent he had prepared for it in his capital.

The majority of interpreters from antiquity onward have been concerned to offer explanations for why Yhwh's slaying of Uzzah as recounted in 2 Samuel 6 was in fact just, or at least justifiable. In the later account of the event as told in 1 Chronicles 13 and 15, for example, we find an attempt to provide an acceptable reason for Yhwh's seemingly capricious response to Uzzah's touch. Whereas the narrative in 2 Samuel offers no rationale for the outburst, the Chronicler explicitly informs us that Yhwh had reacted so violently on the first trip because Uzzah and Ahio were not Levites, and Yhwh had warned that only Levites were permitted to handle the sacred Ark. In this telling,

David discerns the reason for the initial failed attempt and rectifies the situation by instructing the Levites to transport the Ark instead:

12 ויאמר להם אתם ראשׁי האבות ללוים התקדשׁו אתם ואחיכם והעליתם את ארון יהוה אלהי ישׂראל אל־
הכינותי לו: **13** כי למבראשׁונה לא אתם פרץ יהוה אלהינו בנו כי־לא דרשׁנהו כמשׁפט:

"He said to them: You are the heads of the Levite patriarchs. Consecrate yourselves and your brothers, and take up the Ark of Yhwh, God of Israel, to the place I have established for it. Because you were not there the first time, Yhwh our God burst forth against us because we did not attend to it according to the rule" (1 Chron 15:12–13).

The Chronicler asserts that the Israelites themselves were responsible for the deadly incident. This explanation attempts to account for a divine act that otherwise might have been deemed cruel and arbitrary. It appears to be based on a biblical tradition that the Levites were specially commissioned to tend to the Ark of the Covenant. In Deuteronomy, we are told that God appointed the Levites to handle the Ark:

בעת ההוא הבדיל יהוה את־שׁבט הלוי לשׂאת את־ארון ברית־יהוה לעמד לפני יהוה לשׁרתו ולברך
בשׁמו עד היום הזה:

"At that time Yhwh designated the tribe of Levi to carry the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh, to serve Yhwh by ministering to him, and by blessing in his name, up to this very day" (Deut 10:8).

As we have already observed, the regulations in Numbers state that only a specific type of Levites, the Kohathites, were to carry the Ark and other holy objects on their shoulders. But 2 Samuel 6 gives no indication regarding whether Uzzah and Ahio were Levites, or Kohathites for that matter. For all we know, they might have been. Moreover, in spite of the other biblical traditions specifying that only Levites should handle the Ark

of the Covenant, the Ark Narrative itself contains examples of non-Levite custodians of the Ark who fare perfectly well. In 2 Sam 6:10–11, Obed-Edom the Gittite (a person from the Philistine city of Gath) is blessed after David deposits the Ark in his house. Not only is Obed-Edom not a Levite: he is not even an Israelite! The Chronicler deals with this problematic piece of evidence by stating that Obed-Edom was in fact a Levite and a gate-keeper for the Ark (1 Chron 15:18, 24). It seems clear, however, that the Levite-only law was not held to be operative within the Ark Narrative itself.

Just as ancient interpreters wrestled with this theologically problematic text, modern scholars have also labored to justify the violent behavior of the deity here. Instead of focusing on the Levite issue, at least one contemporary scholar, Menahem Haran, holds that the death of Uzzah (and the fact that he transported the Ark on a cart rather than bearing it on his shoulders) may be taken as evidence that he was not a "true" priest: "All this is clear proof that Abinadab's family did not really belong to the priesthood, for otherwise they would have borne the ark like priests and would not have been affected by touching it."[293] Against such readings that question the priestly legitimacy of Uzzah and Ahio, Campbell observes: "both men are described as the sons of Abinadab, in whose house the ark has rested for a goodly period of time. … As a son of Abinadab, no one was better qualified than Uzzah to touch the ark."[294] Other interpreters have pointed to the aforementioned Priestly stipulations in Numbers 4, concluding that even bona fide priests who hazard to touch the Ark should expect to die.

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[293] Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 80.

[294] Campbell, *2 Samuel*, 66.

Those who maintain that, in touching the Ark, Uzzah violated a previously established rule often support their case by pointing to the obscure phrase in 2 Sam 6:7, עַל־הַשְּׁל.[295] In our translation of this passage in chapter 3, we noted S. R. Driver's evaluation of the word הַשְּׁל.[296] In short, it is difficult to make sense of the phrase.[297] Most translations render it "on account of the error," but such a reading is based on an Aramaic root שְׁלָה, "to act erroneously," which Driver has deemed philologically implausible. Driver concludes that it would be more prudent to understand the phrase as a corrupt apocopation of the longer statement that occurs in the parallel account in Chronicles: עַל אֲשֶׁר־שָׁלַח יָדוֹ עַל־הָאָרוֹן, "because he reached out his hand to the Ark" (1 Chron 13:10). In Driver's words, "when the strangeness of the Hebrew expression here used is considered, it will hardly be deemed too venturesome to regard it as a mutilated fragment of the words cited from Ch., which were either still read here in their integrity by the Chronicler, or (as the sense is sufficiently plain without them) were introduced here as a gloss from the parallel text of Ch., and afterwards became corrupted."[298] If we read 2 Sam 6:7 in this way, however, it hardly helps us in deciphering the puzzle of Uzzah's death. We might point to this as the proximate cause of Yhwh's anger, but it does not

[295] For an extended text-critical discussion on the interpretation of the phrase, as well as a comprehensive summary of scholarly views on the question, see Robert Rezetko, *Source and Revision in the Narratives of David's Transfer of the Ark: Text, Language, and Story in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 13, 15–16*, LHBOT 470 (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 128–41.

[296] See footnote 34 in chapter 3.

[297] Robert Alter calls the phrase "incomprehensible" (*The David Story*, 226).

[298] S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel*, 2nd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1913], 268.

explain the ultimate cause—that is, why the touch of Uzzah should have enraged the deity so.

David P. Wright observes that Yhwh's Ark appears to have been capable of experiencing sensory stimulation. He offers an erudite discussion of the senses of the Ark in his article, "Music and Dance in 2 Samuel 6."[299] Based on a sensory analysis, Wright seeks to explain why David's first attempt to bring the Ark to Jerusalem failed and the second attempt succeeded. Wright notes that the second procession differed from the first in two major respects: 1) During the second trip, animals were sacrificed in front of the Ark, which would have engaged the deity's sense of taste and smell. 2) The music and dance accompanying the Ark, which provided aural and visual stimulation, was more extravagant in the second procession.[300] It is significant, Wright concludes, that only one of the five senses was not engaged in the second journey—the sense of touch. But this, he suggests, is only appropriate, as the first attempt to transfer the Ark was botched for this very reason.

Wright's analysis is among the most creative and compelling of scholarly efforts to explain Yhwh's outburst against Uzzah. Like all explanations, however, it presumes that Uzzah did something wrong. In her doctoral dissertation, Deborah Sunoo has argued that we should not take this for granted. As she warns, "the danger for exegetes lies in the

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[299] David P. Wright, "Music and Dance in 2 Samuel 6," *JBL* 121 (2002): 201–25.

[300] C. L. Seow suggests that the dancing may have had a specific ritual purpose: "David and his retinue were participating in dances imitating animal movements. Their purpose, to judge from the sequence of events in the procession, was to dramatize the dance of nature before the divine warrior. Thus, the refrain that they were prancing, leaping, and skipping 'before YAHWEH' (לפני יהוה, vv. 5, 14, 16) alludes not only to the actual dancing before the ark, but to the convulsion of nature before the presence of Yahweh the warrior (cf. Pss 68:9; 97:5; 114:7, etc.)" (*Myth, Drama, and the Politics of David's Dance* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989], 116).

temptation… to assume that Uzzah must have erred *because* God became angry and killed him. The logical fallacy proceeds as follows: (a) When humans sin, God punishes them. (b) Therefore, if God bursts forth against someone that individual must have done something to provoke God's wrath."[301] But, as Sunoo points out, the book of Job and other biblical texts constitute evidence that ancient authors imagined scenarios in which Yhwh inflicts suffering upon blameless human beings. Thus, it may be advisable for interpreters to refrain from seeking to rationalize the divine motive behind the outbursts of the Ark in these tales.

The Ark: Machine or Animal?

As we have seen, many scholars claim that Uzzah and the citizens of Beth-Shemesh must have violated a previously established rule or divine command. Others do not attempt such explanations, but instead simply point to the inherent danger of holiness as the reason for the lethal outbursts. Biblical scholars who fall into this camp almost invariably use mechanistic metaphors to account for the behavior of the Ark, comparing its power to a natural force such as electricity or nuclear energy. Already in 1924, Paul Volz likened the holiness of Yhwh to deadly electricity. In his view, "Yahweh was first conceived as an electrical force of nature, which kills everyone and everything it touches, just as a

[301] Deborah Hannay Sunoo, "God Bursts Forth: Unexpected Disruptions in the Narrative Landscape of the Hebrew Bible" (PhD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1999), 78.

moth dies against the light."[302] Many contemporary scholars have taken up the same metaphor. With regard to the account of Uzzah's death, Robert Alter comments: "This is an archaic story that defies later ethical categories: The Ark, as God's terrestrial throne, is invested with awesome divine power (compare 1 Samuel 6). To touch it, even in an effort to keep it from slipping from the cart, is to risk being consumed by its indwelling mana, as when one comes in contact with a high-voltage electric core."[303]

The idea of the Ark as a nuclear reactor, on the other hand, is nicely articulated by Gary A. Anderson: "To use a modern metaphor, one might imagine the Temple as a giant electrical generating plant that powered the land of Israel. In its core was a nuclear reactor in which the radioactive rods emitted divine energy that was absorbed by the entire infrastructure of the building. Though the glow was brightest at the center, even the periphery had to be entered and handled with caution."[304] Such mechanical conceptions lend themselves to the conclusion that anyone who comes in contact with the Ark would perish instantaneously. David P. Wright, for example, insists: "Touching or encroaching upon the deity or the ark is forbidden. Such contact can only end in catastrophe. This is why Uzzah dies."[305]

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[302] English translation mine. Volz's original German reads: "Zunächst fasste man Jahwe wie eine elektrische Naturegewalt, die jeden und alles tötet, was sie berührt, wie die Motte am Licht stirbt" (Paul Volz, *Das Dämonische in Jahwe* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1924], 9).

[303] Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 226. Note that when Alter refers to the mana of the Ark here, he means its numinous power; the word should not be confused with the manna that was supposedly contained in the Ark according to the New Testament tradition. The book of Hebrews describes the furnishings of the Holy of Holies as follows: "In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat" (Heb 9:4–5a, NRSV).

[304] Anderson, "Towards a Theology of the Tabernacle and Its Furniture," 167.

[305] Wright, "Music and Dance in 2 Samuel 6," 225.

But the view that the situation could not have gone otherwise does not accord with David's confounded response to the outburst against Uzzah. Instead, the bewilderment of David and the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh in the face of Yhwh's violence suggests that the Ark did not operate in a predictable manner. Moreover, as we have seen, the Ark Narrative itself does not refer to any prior law or tradition stating that the Ark should never be touched or looked at, or that it must be handled only by Levites. Against the many biblical scholars who are fond of comparing the Ark to a machine or a force of nature, I argue that the Ark of Yhwh is presented in these narratives as a sensitive, living object with an idiosyncratic personality. As such, its behavior may be more aptly compared to that of a partially domesticated wild animal, e.g., a warhorse.

I believe that the concept of the Ark as a dangerous animal has significant advantages over the mechanistic metaphor. Unlike a machine or a natural force, an animal's behavior is inconsistent: the beast cannot always be expected to respond in the same way to any particular stimulus. This is not to suggest that an animal's behavior is entirely random or that we cannot anticipate a species or individual to perform according to certain patterns based on our prior knowledge of or interactions with that animal. When handling a horse, for example, one would be ill advised to stand directly behind it and make loud noises or movements that might alarm the animal. This is because horses are known to kick in response to this type of stimulus. But unlike an electric fence, which will invariably sting the person who touches it, a horse might not respond in the way we expect. It is conceivable that a person who shouts and jumps up and down while standing behind a horse might still manage to emerge from the situation unscathed. This is not to

suggest that a horse is less dangerous than an electric fence, however. By the same token, one must be especially vigilant with horses, since they might become irritated by any stimulus and lash out at their human attendants, even when correct handling procedures are followed.[306]

If we apply this metaphor to the story of Uzzah, it might be suggested that his touching of the Ark is analogous to dancing behind an equine: it is a risky move that might well trigger an aggressive response (though such a response is not *inevitable*). Using the same metaphor, it might also be suggested that Uzzah did not act improperly in touching the Ark (that is, he did nothing that was generally known to trigger divine aggression), but the stimulus might nonetheless have aggravated the deity. This view would correspond to the situation in which a horse bites someone who had been attending to it properly. In such a scenario, it is understandable that David would be angered by Yhwh's response to Uzzah's touch. By contrast, the idea that the Ark behaves like a mechanical device in this case is less fitting here, as it would make little sense to get angry at the working of an electrical fence. Unpredictability is an essential aspect of any personality—animal, human, or divine. In contrast to the mechanistic metaphor, conceptualizing the Ark of Yhwh as a temperamental animal preserves the aspect of personality, which is indispensible if we wish to maintain the possibility of a dynamic relationship between divine and human beings. Such an understanding also discourages excessive moralizing or rationalizing with regard to the violent behavior of Yhwh's Ark, highlighting instead the essential otherness and awesome mystery of the divine being.

[306] Here the author speaks from personal experience, having been bit on the ear by a horse she had just finished grooming carefully. Fortunately, the earlobe was not severed, but stitches were necessary.

David as Ark Tamer

Concerning David's role in transferring the Ark to Jerusalem, contemporary biblical scholars have put forward two opposing interpretations. Some claim that the procession of the Ark as described in 2 Samuel 6 demonstrates Yhwh's freedom in coming to the city. David himself did not bring the Ark to Jerusalem, they insist. Rather, by violently thwarting the initial procession, Yhwh makes it clear that he entered the city of his own volition. As Campbell puts it, "Clearly, the intention is to establish Yahweh as the sole principal in the drama. It is a statement that David did not bring the ark to Jerusalem through military and political achievements; he brought the ark to Jerusalem through, and only through the favour of Yahweh."[307]

This interpretation of 2 Samuel 6 recalls the relationship between the protagonists in the myth of *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, particularly as presented in the Neo-Assyrian version. As we discussed in chapter 2, Nergal descends to the Netherworld on two separate occasions in this tale. The first time, it seems that Ereshkigal forced him to descend, but Nergal subsequently shows that he is able to come and go as he pleases when he leaves the Netherworld without her permission. Like David, who is upset by Yhwh's resistance to his attempt to usher the Ark into his city, Queen Ereshkigal is enraged and distraught when Nergal slips away from her. Nergal's second descent appears to have been a violent procession, demonstrating the god's power and autonomy. Although in the end Nergal responds positively to the desire of Ereshkigal by returning to

[307] Campbell, *The Ark Narrative*, 141.

rule with her there, the myth clarifies that the lady in no way coerced Nergal into settling in her city. If we hold that the staggered procession of the Ark in 2 Samuel 6 is meant to demonstrate Yhwh's freedom, then the outburst against Uzzah may likewise be interpreted as a deliberate display of divine potency.

On the other hand, as will be shown below, the animalistic metaphor we have developed with regard to the Ark is perhaps better suited to the second way in which biblical scholars have understood the account of the Ark's transfer. These scholars stress the inimical aspect of the relationship between God and king; they regard David as having succeeded in bringing the Ark to Jerusalem *despite* the deity's preferences. In this interpretation, the procession of 2 Samuel 6 represents a sort of battle between divine and human players in which the king emerges victorious. Whereas in Campbell's reading, the blessing of Obed-Edom functions as a sort of "green light" to David, welcoming him to resume his effort, Donald F. Murray offers a different analysis:

> …on normal Israelite religious premises the blessing of Obed Edom's household "on account of the ark" was a sign, not that Yahweh was now happy for David to remove the ark from there to David's city, but rather that he approved of its present lodgement. David's removal of the ark cannot but be seen as the highhanded and self-serving act of one whose aim, now none too covert, is to strengthen his *melek*-ship.[308]

The halting of the first procession to Jerusalem is not only the occasion in which Yhwh opposes David's designs for the Ark. Even after David manages to escort the Ark to Jerusalem, the divine resistance to his royal initiative continues. In the immediately

[308] Donald F. Murray, *Divine Prerogative and Royal Pretension: Pragmatics, Poetics, and Polemics in a Narrative Sequence about David (2 Samuel 5.17-7.29)*, JSOTSup 264 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 133.

subsequent chapter, in fact, Yhwh refuses outright the king's offer to build a temple for the Ark.

Yhwh Rejects David's Temple Bid

After David accomplishes a series of truly impressive feats—wresting the kingship from Saul, subduing the Philistines, and constructing a grand palace for himself in Jerusalem—he attempts yet another ambitious task. According to 2 Samuel 7, the king proposes to build a temple for the Ark of Yhwh, which he has brought into his capital and set up in a tent. After all, as David reasons to the prophet Nathan, ראה נא אנכי יושׁב בבית ארזים וארון האלהים ישׁב בתוך היריעה, "Look, I am living in a house of cedar, but the Ark of God is living in a tent!" (2 Sam 7:2). One might expect that Yhwh would be pleased by David's generous offer, which appears to be motivated by a spirit of piety. However, Yhwh's response is surprisingly antagonistic. He commands Nathan:

5 לך ואמרת אל־עבדי אל־דוד כה אמר יהוה האתה תבנה־לי בית לשׁבתי: **6** כי לא ישׁבתי בבית למיום העלתי
את־בני ישׂראל ממצרים ועד היום הזה ואהיה מתהלך באהל ובמשׁכן: **7** בכל אשׁר־התהלכתי בכל־בני ישׂראל
הדבר דברתי את־אחד שׁבטי ישׂראל אשׁר צויתי לרעות את־עמי את־ישׂראל לאמר למה לא־בניתם לי בית
ארזים:

> Go and say to my servant David: Thus says Yhwh: Are *you* the one who will build for *me* a house to live in? I have not lived in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up from Egypt until today, but have been roaming about in a tent and a tabernacle. In all the places I have roamed among all the Israelites, did I ever speak a word to any one of the leaders whom I commanded to shepherd my people, saying: Why have you not built for me a house of cedar? (2 Sam 7:5–7)

From this abrasive answer, it seems that Yhwh suspects an ulterior motive underlying David's desire to build a house for the Ark. Instead of being grateful that his servant wishes to honor him with a luxurious temple, Yhwh appears to balk at the idea that David

should want to restrict his freedom of movement. Although David never explicitly states that he intends to curb the independence of the deity, Yhwh's protest to the king's plan merits consideration.

In 1 Samuel 4–6, the Ark of Yhwh emerges as an unpredictable entity capable of killing Philistines and Israelites alike. The lethal energy of the Ark is also highlighted in 2 Samuel 6, when Yhwh slays the unfortunate Uzzah, who touches the Ark during the procession to Jerusalem. The juxtaposition of this disastrous event with David's desire to build a temple has led Lyle M. Eslinger to argue that David's primary goal in his construction efforts was to exert control over an erratic deity. As Eslinger puts it: "It is probable that David's experience with the ark in ch. 6 is the immediate provocation that leads him to the hope of temple building. With the ark in his cedar box, he could strengthen his grip on the throne at the same time that he regularized access to and control over the central cult symbol of the deity who could act so incomprehensibly."[309]

The interpretation of 2 Samuel 7 as a royal attempt to contain the deity appears to be supported by the overall narrative of the Ark as told in the books of Samuel: In 1 Samuel 4–6, the Ark travels from city to city, ravaging Philistines and Israelites; in 2 Samuel 6, the Ark strikes out against Uzzah in an extravagant procession. After being deposited in the Holy of Holies of Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8), however, the formerly dynamic Ark quietly retires from battle duty; never again do we see it spreading plagues

[309] Lyle M. Eslinger, *House of God or House of David? The Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 7*, JSOTSup 164 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 17. P. Kyle McCarter also observes that the strong language of Yhwh's rebuff suggests a power struggle between god and king: "the first verb, 'I haven't lived (in a house)," refers to continuous residence or presence in one place, while the verbal expression 'I've gone about (in a tent) wherever I happened to go' is an idiomatic way of indicating freedom of movement. The pointed contrast is reinforced by the nouns 'house' and 'tent,' and the overall effect is a strong implication that the proposed temple would impose a restriction on the divine freedom" (P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, AB 9 [New York: Doubleday, 1984], 226–27).

or committing acts of slaughter as it does in 1–2 Samuel, nor is there any indication that it accompanied the Israelites in battle. Instead, the Ark of the temple comes to be regarded as a stable sign of divine approbation for Jerusalem and the house of David. It would seem, then, that for the Ark to be settled in the temple is for the Ark to be subdued.

David as Heroic Shepherd

If the behavior of the Ark may be compared to that of a dangerous animal, it is only fitting that King David should attempt to subdue it. After all, in the Hebrew Bible, David is presented as the quintessential shepherd king, capable of vigorously defending his flock against predatory beasts.[310] Before taking on Goliath, David boasts of his skills as a slayer of wild animals:

34 ויאמר דוד אל־שׁאול רעה היה עבדך לאביו בצאן ובא הארי ואת־הדוב ונשׂא שׂה מהעדר: **35** ויצאתי אחריו והכתיו והצלתי מפיו ויקם עלי והחזקתי בזקנו והכתיו והמיתיו:

"When the lion and bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went out after it and rescued [the sheep] from its mouth. And if it rose up against me, I would grab it by its beard and strike it down and kill it" (1 Sam 17:34–35).[311] To be an effective shepherd to his people, King David must not only protect them from their human enemies; he must also guarantee safety from the manifestation of their god that has become a source of danger to them—namely, the Ark.

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[310] For a fuller discussion of the motif of kings subduing wild animals in ancient Near Eastern visual and textual sources, see Michael J. Chan and Maria Metzler, "Lions and Leopards and Bears, O My: Re-Reading Isaiah 11:6–9 in Light of Comparative Iconographic and Literary Evidence," in *Image, Text, Exegesis: Iconographic Interpretation and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Izaak J. de Hulster and Joel M. LeMon (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 196–25. In this article, I also include a discussion of David as shepherd king.

[311] See also Ps 78:70–72, which states that God took David from shepherding animals to guide and protect the Israelites.

Seen from this perspective, David's act of publically parading the formidable Ark into his capital city and containing it there resembles a venerable royal tradition in the ancient Near East. In Mesopotamian texts and images, kings were commonly portrayed in the act of subduing wild beasts or proudly herding them into their cities, where the animals were tamed and displayed. For these kings, the more dangerous the animal, the more impressive their accomplishment was considered to be.

Among the earliest attestations of Assyrian kings conquering wild animals is an inscription from Tiglath-Pileser I (1115–1077 BCE), who boasts about his hunting prowess and claims to have brought live elephants back to exhibit in Assur, his capital city. Tiglath-Pileser I highlights the ferocious character of the quarry with great pride:

> I killed ten strong bull elephants in the land Harran and the region of the River Habur (and) four live elephants I captured. I brought the hides and tusks (of the dead elephants) with the live elephants to my city Assur. By the command of the god Ninurta, who loves me, I killed on foot 120 lions with my wildly outstanding assault. In addition, 800 lions I felled from my light chariot. I have brought down every kind of wild beast and winged bird of the heavens whenever I have shot an arrow.[312]

In the Neo-Assyrian period, Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) recounts how he captured wild beasts, which he then exhibited to the public in his capital Calah: "I took away 50 lion cubs. I herded them into Calah and the palaces of my land into cages. I bred their cubs in great numbers… Beasts of mountain and plain, all of them in my city Calah. I displayed them to all the people of my land."[313] The most renowned hunter of wild animals in Mesopotamia, however, is Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE), whose penchant for lion slaying is extensively illustrated on the wall reliefs of his palace in Nineveh. In a

[312] Benjamin R. Foster, "Animals in Mesopotamian Literature," in *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Billie Jean Collins (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 271–88, at 285.

[313] RIMA 2:A.0.102, 31b–38a.

passage from the "Great Hunting Text," Ashurbanipal explains that he killed lions in order to protect the inhabitants of his land, who were being terrorized by a mob of vicious felines:

> The young of the lions grew up therein, in countless numbers. They became fierce and terrible through their devouring of herds, flocks and people.... They keep bringing down the cattle of the plain, they keep shedding the blood of men. As if the plague had broken loose, there were heaped up the corpses of dead men, cattle and [sheep]. The shepherds and herdsmen weep at the lions … The villages are in mourning day and night. Of the deeds of these lions they told me.[314]

The violent course of the Ark in 1–2 Samuel resembles the devastation of the lions described in this passage. Whereas the Philistines and the residents of Beth-Shemesh remove the Ark from them after suffering Yhwh's terrible wrath, David persists in his quest to capture the Ark despite having witnessed the attack against Uzzah. In fact, it could be argued that David seeks custody of the Ark not merely *despite* its violent proclivities, but rather he may wish to possess the Ark precisely *because of* its reputation as a dangerous being. In such a view, the notoriously destructive Ark represents an opportunity for David to become the ultimate shepherd of his people. If David could manage to capture the raging Ark, such a feat would demonstrate beyond a doubt his worthiness as a ruler, showing him to be capable of protecting the Israelites from the most fearsome creature of all. Unlike the lion-slaying king Ashurbanipal, David does not seek to annihilate this "wild animal." Rather, David's quest to settle the Ark in Jerusalem is more akin to those kings who boast about subduing and displaying living wild animals

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[314] *ARAB* 2:363.

in their cities. The intense energy of the Ark may be dangerous, but it also has a potential to benefit the people.

After David manages to wrangle the unruly ark into his capital city, the Ark ceases to inflict harm on the Israelites. To an important degree, then, King David has proven his ability to protect the Israelites from the wild energy of the Ark that had terrorized them in the recent past. It appears that David has managed to confine and tame the previously wild creature. However, one might claim that the Ark is not entirely domesticated until King Solomon, the illustrious son of David, constructs the temple and escorts the Ark to its resting place in the Holy of Holies. After this celebrated event, the Ark is not mentioned again at all throughout the Deuteronomistic History. As Gary Knoppers observes, the settling of the Ark by Solomon marks a major shift in Israelite religion, in that the Ark has been overtaken by the Temple: "The portable ark plays no continuing role, except as part of its permanent home. Conversely, by presenting the temple as enduring, the Deuteronomist portrays worship at the temple of Jerusalem as definitive for succeeding generations."[315] At the instigation of King David, the holy Ark that had once wrought havoc upon the people has at last been tamed. Instead of a wandering, unpredictable Ark, the Israelites have been given a stable Temple that affirms the legitimacy of their monarch and provides them with a sense of divine security.

In addition to fitting the storyline of 1–2 Samuel, the idea that a troublesome deity could be appeased by settling that god in a temple is paralleled by other ancient Near Eastern accounts, such as the poem of *Erra and Ishum*, in which the Mesopotamian

[315] Gary N. Knoppers, "Prayer and Propaganda: Solomon's Dedication of the Temple and the Deuteronomist's Program," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57 (1995): 229–54, at 242.

plague god Erra only ceases to ravage the land when put to rest his house. The intimate, yet somewhat adversarial relationship between Yhwh and David as presented in 2 Samuel is much like the one between Erra and his counselor, Ishum, as portrayed in this poem.

The Ark Narrative and *Erra and Ishum*

Miller and Roberts present some interesting parallels between the capture of the divine images in Mesopotamian accounts and the capture of the Ark. However, I have explained why I find the theological conclusions they draw from their comparative analysis less than satisfying. I suggest that we would do well to consider the Ark Narrative in light of another Mesopotamian text that deals with cultic images and also presents a portrait of a raging god: the first-millennium Babylonian composition, *Erra and Ishum*.[316] Like the Ark Narrative, the action of this text is set in motion when a divine image is displaced. The destructive rampage of Yhwh's Ark begins when it is removed from its sanctuary at Shiloh. Similarly, the poem of *Erra and Ishum* describes the chaos that breaks out when the statue of Marduk, god of Babylon, departs from its customary place.

In order for Erra to take over Babylonia, he must first dislodge Marduk from the throne. Erra accomplishes his aim by essentially insulting Marduk, pointing to the dingy appearance of his cult statue: "Why does the finery, your lordship's adornment which is full of splendor like the stars of heaven, grow dirty? The crown of your lordship … its surface is tarnished!"[317] It seems that Marduk recognizes the accuracy of this insult, as he

[316] The standard critical edition of the text is Luigi Cagni, *L'Epopea di Erra*, Studi Semitici 34 (Rome: Istituto di studi del Vicino Oriente dell'Università, 1969).

[317] Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 290.

states his intention to leave his position temporarily in order to have his statue refurbished. Marduk does worry, however, that when he departs from his place, chaos will ensue: "I shall rise from my dwelling, and the control of heaven and earth will be undone."[318] Erra assures Marduk that he has nothing to fear: he would take good care of Babylon while Marduk is off having his statue repaired. As he promises: "Prince Marduk, until you re-enter that house and Gerra cleanses your robes, and you return to your place, / Until then I shall rule and keep firm control of heaven and earth."[319]

But in fact, when Marduk departs and Erra takes the throne, he proceeds to terrorize Babylonia, spreading plagues and slaying its human inhabitants. In his destructive acts, Erra describes himself as a ferocious animal: "In heaven I am a wild bull, on earth I am a lion. ... Among cattle I am the smiter, in the mountains I am a wild ram."[320] Erra does not desist from his cataclysmic rampage until his counselor Ishum confronts him aggressively. Only when he is settled in his pleasant dwelling does Erra at last calm down.[321] As a raging warrior appeased by solitary confinement, the behavior of Erra mirrors that of the Ark, which only calms down when settled in its sanctuary.

There are other parallels between ways in which Yhwh and Erra are described in these texts. When Yhwh reacts to David's offer to build a temple, for example, he expresses a marked preference for a wandering life in the wilderness as opposed to the prospect of being housed in an urban temple. The god Erra also exhibits a preference for

[318] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 292.

[319] Ibid., 293.

[320] Ibid., 289.

[321] See ibid., 309.

a rural lifestyle in *Erra and Ishum*. Peter Machinist has observed that the image of Erra "as a warrior at home in the plain instead of the city, and accustomed to the food and living quarters of the plain (I 47–59), picks up the old motif of the rural dweller, attested in Mesopotamia, especially in regard to the Amorites, already at the turn of the second millennium BCE."[322] It is possible that the image of Yhwh presented in 2 Sam 7:5–7 participates in the same literary motif. In the poem of *Erra and Ishum*, moreover, the god is said to have desolated the five major cities in Babylonia: Babylon, Sippar, Uruk, Dūr-Kurigalzu, and Dēr. This recalls the five Philistines cities that Yhwh afflicts according to 1 Samuel 5–6.

Eventually, Marduk returns to his rightful place, and order is restored in Babylonia. But the bulk of the poem describes a chaotic situation in which a god turns against human society and destroys it indiscriminately. Erra's counselor Ishum chastises him for acting unfairly: "O warrior Erra, you have put the just to death, You have put the unjust to death. You have put to death the man who sinned against you, You have put to death the man who did not sin against you. … You have put old men to death on the porch, You have put young girls to death in their bedrooms."[323] In the biblical text, no justification is provided for the violence inflicted by Yhwh's Ark. Rather, if asked, it seems that Yhwh might respond in the same way Erra does when Ishum objects to his behavior. After having settled peaceably in his dwelling following his bloody rampage,

[322] Peter Machinist, "Order and Disorder: Some Mesopotamian Reflections," in *Genesis and Regeneration: Essays on Conceptions of Origins*, ed. Shaul Shaked (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2005), 31–61, at 51.

[323] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 309.

Erra answers Ishum's accusation by simply exclaiming: "What if I did intend the harm of the wrong I have just done? When I am enraged, I devastate people!"[324]

Erra and Ishum, the Ark of Yhwh and David

The composition of *Erra and Ishum* is essentially about the divine nature of Erra. It gives a picture of a somewhat schizophrenic deity, considering that the personalities of Erra and Ishum are so closely intertwined throughout the poem. In his article, "Cataclysm, Survival, and Regeneration in the Hebrew Bible," Jon D. Levenson has noted the duality of the divine personality in this Babylonian composition, which he calls "a projection into narrative of the deep psychological dynamics internal to one god, Erra-Išum." According to Levenson, "the poem represents a duality fundamental to the divine-human relationship: Divinity is both hostile and benevolent, both destructive and restorative."[325] In the same essay, Levenson points to biblical texts that would suggest a similar bipolarity in the God of Israel:

> We have been examining ways in which the Hebrew Bible personifies the negative forces identified with chaos, death, exile, and the like as a sea monster or a people whom YHWH must overcome, even as he has at moments of redemption in the past. Not always, however, is the negative dimension personified as an adversary of YHWH. Sometimes, it—or, at least, some aspects of it—are seen as a side of God himself, in a theology that is surely less dualistic but hardly more comforting than the combat myth. This negative side of God is the demonic dimension, the awareness that YHWH can be "uncanny, ghastly, ferocious, hostile, and nearly Satanic."[326]

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[324] Ibid.

[325] Jon D. Levenson, "Cataclysm, Survival, and Regeneration in the Hebrew Bible," in *Confronting Omnicide: Jewish Reflections on Weapons of Mass Destruction*, ed. Daniel Landes (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991), 39–68, at 42–43.

[326] Ibid., 48–49. Here Levenson quotes from the work of Paul Volz, *Das Dämonische in Jahwe*, 4.

In 1–2 Samuel, it would appear that the Ark is one manifestation of Yhwh that can be hostile and capricious, even demonic. This aspect of the divine personality is much like the god Erra, who delights in slaying when his rage is provoked. When he is content, however, Erra can be benevolent.[327] Despite its violent tendencies, the Ark of Yhwh, too, is capable of enriching human society, as we see in the Ark Narrative when the household of Obed-Edom is blessed because of the presence of the Ark.

In our discussion above, we expounded upon the idea that the divine-human relationship in the Ark Narrative is largely inimical, with David playing the role of combatant against the dangerous Ark of Yhwh in 2 Samuel 6. But perhaps the relationship between David and the Ark of Yhwh is not quite as adversarial as scholars such as Eslinger have asserted. After all, such a reading admittedly goes against the grain of the obvious fact that David is presented consistently in biblical texts as Yhwh's anointed, hand-picked king. Both aspects of the relationship between Yhwh and David should be given due consideration.

Despite his anger and fear after Yhwh's slaying of Uzzah, King David perseveres in his attempt to escort the volatile Ark of Yhwh to Jerusalem. We have seen that Yhwh resists two of his royal initiatives: first to transport the Ark to Jerusalem, and then for the Ark to be housed in the temple that David wished to build. But it should also be acknowledged that the second procession to Jerusalem is a success; moreover, Yhwh gladly allowed the second king of the Davidic dynasty, Solomon, to build the temple that

[327] Ponchia and Luuko remind us of Nergal's "festive, joyous aspect." One of his epithets is "Nergal of joy" (Simonetta Ponchia and Mikko Luukko, *The Standard Babylonian Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal*, SAACT VIII [Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2013], xvii n 22).

David had first envisioned. In a sense, then, Yhwh does permit the Davidic initiatives that he had at first resisted.

Yhwh's refusal to permit David to build him a temple is surprisingly hostile. But immediately thereafter, Yhwh makes an unconditional promise to David that his heirs would always remain on the throne (2 Sam 7:8–17). This promise continues to echo throughout scripture. It is reiterated, for instance, in Ps 89:4–5:

4 כרתי ברית לבחירי נשבעתי לדוד עבדי׃
5 עד־עולם אכין זרעך ובניתי לדר־ודור כסאך סלה׃

> I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
> I have sworn to David my servant.
> I will establish forever your seed,
> and I will build up your throne from generation to generation.
> Selah.
> (Ps 89:4–5 [ET 3–4])

As Levenson has noted, later in this psalm (v. 26), Yhwh also entrusts to David "the sea" (ים) and "the rivers" (נהרות), which elsewhere represent chaotic forces, sometimes in the form of a sea monster, which Yhwh himself normally battles.

> Other texts envision creation as the result of the victory of YHWH over chaos personified as a sea monster. It is that victory that establishes YHWH's supremacy over the other gods, his universal kingship (symbolized by the Temple, his cosmic palace), and his mastery over all that is. … Not every such text, however, depicts the monster as destroyed. In one, YHWH commits his primordial opponent to the custody of his son and vicegerent, King David and his dynasty (Psalm 89:10–11, 26).[328]

In many ways, David may be seen as playing the role of Ishum in our narrative. Like Ishum, David actively confronts the deity, oversees his settlement in a house, and is indignant over the unjust killing perpetuated by the god. But can Ishum in fact be credited

[328] Levenson, "Cataclysm, Survival, and Regeneration," 46.

with the taming of the enraged Erra? Peter Machinist has suggested that, despite Ishum's important function in the poem, in the end, it is Erra who tames himself:

> In the Erra poem, on the other hand, while Ishum assumes some of Erra's violence, he never kills, nor tries to kill, Erra; rather, he just helps him to calm down and assume, as it were, Ishum's own orderly propensity. The result is that by the last stage of the narrative Erra becomes himself the restorer and guarantor of the established order he had earlier dissolved (IV 128–V 38). In other words, as we read through the Erra poem, Erra turns out to be not simply an Anzu-like figure; he also takes on the character of Ninurta by conquering himself.[329]

Drawing on these observations by my esteemed teachers Levenson and Machinist, I would suggest a reading of David's role in relation to the dangerous Ark that is more nuanced than the strongly inimical view that Eslinger and others have advocated. If the Ark manifests a demonic aspect of the divine personality, then it is conceivable that Yhwh would desire for this part of himself to be contained. Perhaps like the sea monsters that Yhwh entrusts to his servant David in Psalm 89, Yhwh here permits a chaotic aspect of his own personality—the one manifested in his Ark—to be battled and tamed by David. In this perspective, then, the taming of the Ark may best be regarded as a joint effort between Yhwh and David.

Remarkably, Mesopotamian texts support a similar understanding for Nergal's relationship with kings. Above, we discussed several examples of texts where kings kill fearsome animals at the command of a god. The favorite quarry of Assyrian kings is the lion; in fact, killing a lion was considered to be a royal prerogative.[330] A number of texts

[329] Machinist, "Order and Disorder," 48.

[330] Brent A. Strawn, *What Is Stronger Than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2005), 161–74.

specify that Nergal is the god who commands a king to kill lions.[331] Interestingly, the god Nergal was also frequently referred to as a lion. One of his epithets is "Lion clad with splendor."[332] Nergal thus is represented both as the dangerous lion and the one who commissions kings to kill lions. If the interpretation of Yhwh entrusting the Ark to David for taming is valid, then the motif of a god who allows the king to conquer a violent aspect of the divine personality is attested in Mesopotamian and in ancient Israelite literature.

Terrible Text as Amulet

The sinister tale of *Erra and Ishum* was not only exceedingly popular in ancient Mesopotamia,[333] but the physical text itself appears to have been widely used as an amulet. We have two examples of Tablet V being preserved in the form of an amulet: a tablet with a pierced square tab at the top that was used to hang it up.[334] There is also one amulet from Assur on which the entire epic is inscribed. The form of these amulets suggests that the purpose of the text was to ward off plague, which is corroborated by the epilogue of *Erra and Ishum*. Tablet V declares: "In the house where this tablet is placed, even if Erra becomes angry and the Sebitti storm, the sword of judgment shall not come

[331] Ponchia and Luukko, *The Standard Babylonian Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal*, liii, lviii.

[332] Ibid., lxv. Yhwh likewise plays the part of lion in numerous biblical texts. In Amos 1:2, for instance, Yhwh is imagined as a lion roaring from Jerusalem.

[333] Peter Machinist notes, "The poem about the god Erra must clearly be reckoned one of the major texts of Mesopotamian religious literature, whether gauged by its content and literary artistry or by the evidence of its ancient popularity. Not less than thirty-six copies were recovered from at least five sites of the first millennium B.C.—a larger number, as L. Cagni points out, than even the copies known to the Gilgamesh Epic from the same period" ("Rest and Violence in the Poem of Erra," *JAOS* 103 [1983]: 221–26, at 222).

[334] See L. W. King, "New Fragments of the Dibbarra-Legend on Two Assyrian Plague-Tablets," *ZA* 11 (1896): 50–62, at 50–51.

near him, but peace is ordained for him."[335] Erica Reiner has deduced from this evidence that the poem was to be hung at the doorway of a house, so that the plague god would pass by and not harm the inhabitants of that household.[336]

I would like to suggest that the biblical narratives featuring the Ark of the Covenant may have served a similar function. As in *Erra and Ishum*, the God of Israel spreads death indiscriminately in the Ark Narrative, among both Philistines and Israelites. And yet this terrifying narrative is preserved within a collection of sacred texts, the Hebrew Bible. Instead of representing a theodicy, as Miller and Roberts have argued, I propose a very different theological function for these texts—namely, that ancient Israelites may have regarded the Ark Narrative as an effective, textual means of warding off or containing the chaotic supernatural forces described therein. In such a view, the narrative does not serve to *justify* the deity's behavior; rather, the efficaciousness of the text *depends* on the fact that Yhwh is behaving erratically here.

Unlike with the poem of *Erra and Ishum*, we do not have material evidence indicating that the text of the Ark Narrative was used as an amulet. But it is still possible that the text itself may have served an apotropaic function. With regard to *Erra and Ishum*, Peter Machinist has noted, "As the final lines proclaim, the very remembering and reciting of the 'song' … is what will provide the needed defense against a repetition of Erra's violent behavior."[337] Machinist goes on to observe: "The poem of Erra, thus, may be understood … as a kind of incantation—that form of literature where … the power of

[335] Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 312.

[336] Erica Reiner, "Plague Amulets and House Blessings," *JNES* 19 (1960): 148–55, at 150.

[337] Peter Machinist, "Rest and Violence in the Poem of Erra," *JAOS* 103 (1983): 221–26, at 226.

language is most explicitly recognized and celebrated, and put to use, as here, both to expose a problem of potentially cosmic dimensions … and to offer a means for its resolution or neutralization."[338]

In the Ark Narrative as well, settling the Ark in Jerusalem results in a neutralization of its violence. Never again does the Ark burst forth and kill Israelites. Instead, the very presence of the Ark in Jerusalem was thought by many to make the city inviolable.[339] Thus, the initially destructive Ark eventually became a kind of amulet deemed responsible for warding off evil from the city. It is perhaps no accident that there are clear allusions to the Passover account in the Ark Narrative. When the Israelites bring the Ark of Yhwh to the battlefield at the beginning of the story, the Philistine warriors are terrified. As they declare, "These are the gods who smote Egypt with every plague in the wilderness!" (1 Sam 4:8). And again, when the Philistines are trying to decide what to do with the Ark after suffering so many plagues, the priests and diviners ask, "But why would you harden your hearts as Egypt and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? Didn't it happen that after he made toys of them, they expelled them and they went on their way?" (1 Sam 6:6). The blood of the Passover lamb is a sign of violence that marked the doorways of the Israelites and deterred the Destroyer from entering and killing their firstborn sons. This being, the Destroyer, is textually conflated with Yhwh in Exodus 12.[340] As we have seen, there is also a close association in our narrative between Yhwh

[338] Ibid.

[339] The doctrine of Zion's inviolability is most clearly articulated in several psalms (e.g., Pss 46 and 48) and in First Isaiah (e.g., 1:7–9, 8:7–15, 18:3–7). See also Jer 3:16–17, where the prophet appears to criticize the Israelites' faith in the Ark as Yhwh's throne.

[340] There appears to be a conflation of the Destroyer and Yhwh himself in Exodus 12; in v. 12, the killing is attributed directly to Yhwh, whereas in vv. 13 and 23, Yhwh and the Destroyer are conflated.

and his Ark. Perhaps the blood shed in the Ark Narrative metaphorically marked the gates of Jerusalem just as the Passover blood physically marked the doorways of the Israelites' ancestors in Egypt.

If "the beginning of wisdom is fear of Yhwh," as the Proverbs proclaim (Prov 9:10), then a text such as the Ark Narrative could be an effective means of promoting such fear. Fear need not be passive, however. After the outburst against Uzzah, David is said to have feared Yhwh. But, after the Ark of Yhwh blesses Obed-Edom, David once again approaches the holy object and manages to channel it effectively as a source of blessing rather than terror among the Israelites.

In conclusion, the amulets containing the text of *Erra and Ishum* provide evidence that a violent and chaotic text can serve to safeguard peace and order in human society. Looking at the Ark Narrative in light of *Erra and Ishum* challenges us to reimagine some common theological presuppositions when it comes to biblical literature. Although biblical scholars have long attempted to offer a logical account of why Yhwh acted so violently in this narrative, a successful theological interpretation of a biblical text does not necessarily require defending the deity's behavior. Instead, the theological challenge may be to think creatively about how a terrifying textual portrait of this deity may have contributed to the way ancient Israelites attempted to navigate hostile forces and their own vulnerability to evil.

CHAPTER 5

HORSES, WOMBS, AND RAGING GODS: INSCRUTABLE DIVINE ANGER IN *ORESTEIA* AND THE ARK NARRATIVE

In the preceding chapters, our discussion has focused primarily on the male protagonists featured in biblical and Mesopotamian narratives: Joshua and David, and the warrior gods Nergal/Erra and Yhwh. We have examined various ways in which these male figures display dominance and legitimate their leadership through the heroic deeds recounted in our narratives. In the present and final chapter, I will turn to consider the female characters that constitute the supporting cast of the Ark Narrative. As we shift our attention to these female figures, we will also modify our method. We will maintain a broadly comparative approach, setting the Ark Narrative alongside another ancient text: the *Oresteia* trilogy of Aeschylus. But whereas previously we were concerned with investigating literary motifs or typologies that recur in ancient Near Eastern texts, in this chapter our reason for contemplating the biblical text in light of another literary work is somewhat different. Here I will juxtapose analogous images from the Ark Narrative and the *Oresteia* trilogy with the goal of drawing out the emotional resonance of these scenes. The guiding question of this endeavor is how we are to understand the inscrutable divine wrath that figures so prominently in both literary works.

One early advocate for reading biblical texts through the lens of metaphor is the third-century Christian theologian Origen. Patricia Cox Miller offers a memorable summary of his exegetical approach: "In the context of scriptural interpretation, Origen remarks that when one brings a metaphoric understanding to the text, there is a 'bursting

of iron bars' as the literal image is shattered and one is carried through to multiple hidden meanings."[341] In this chapter, then, I offer an experimental interpretation of the Ark Narrative that attempts to burst through the iron bars of this text by reading it against a metaphor developed in the *Oresteia* trilogy.

Both the *Oresteia* and the biblical Ark Narrative witness the devastating course of divine wrath as it tears through human lives. The *Oresteia*, a Greek trilogy first performed in 458 BCE, is comprised of the tragedies *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*. This work features the cursed house of Atreus, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, the kings of Argos who launch the Trojan War. In the Ark Narrative of 1–2 Samuel, our protagonist is the Ark of the Covenant of Yhwh, whose presence wreaks havoc among Philistines and Israelites alike until King David at last settles the volatile object in Jerusalem.

Divine wrath propels and undergirds the plotline of these two tales. An enraged Artemis thwarts Agamemnon's mission to Troy, and the wrath of Yhwh lashes out violently from the Ark of the Covenant. Remarkably, however, the precise cause of the deity's anger remains obscure in both accounts. When analyzing the role of supernatural wrath in these stories, most scholars have focused their interpretive energy on attempting to decipher what triggered the anger of these gods. I suggest this approach may be misguided. Rather than discussing possible reasons for divine wrath, in the present chapter I examine the reverberations of rage between divine and human realms by tracing two images that recur in these tales. Vivid scenes of dying females punctuate both plots:

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[341] Patricia Cox Miller, *The Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity: Essays in Imagination and Religion* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2001), 47.

In the *Oresteia* trilogy, female subjugation is accompanied by the metaphor of the bit, that small metal object binding the horse to its human rider. The Ark Narrative contains several poignant episodes involving females whose motherhood is annihilated. An analysis of these images—the bit in *Oresteia* and plagued wombs of the Ark Narrative—and their relation to divine rage yields a complex picture of the role played by wrath in these tales. Above all, these violent images highlight the capacity of rage to promote or impair justice in human society.

Divine Rage in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*

Agamemnon tells how it came to pass that this illustrious king returns triumphant from the famous battle with Troy only to be murdered by his own wife, Clytemnestra. In Aeschlyus's rendition of the story, Agamemnon is a victim of the wrath of Artemis, virgin goddess of the hunt. When the Greek army is about to set sail against Troy, Artemis sends an ill wind that makes it impossible for Agamemnon's ships to leave the harbor. The enraged goddess will only change the winds if Agamemnon sacrifices his virgin daughter, Iphigeneia. The king carries out this dreadful act but is subsequently punished by Artemis for doing so. Even though Agamemnon is thereby permitted to venture forth and capture Troy, the rage of Artemis smolders during his years abroad and takes root in Clytemnestra, who plots vengeance against the man who killed their daughter. When Agamemnon returns home victorious, Clytemnestra arranges an elaborate welcome for her husband, including a luxurious bath in which she stabs him to death.

But, as the elders who witness this vengeance observe, supernatural wrath has a voracious appetite. It is not yet sated with the blood of Agamemnon. In *Libation Bearers*, Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, is driven to avenge his father's death by murdering his mother. *Eumenides* tells how Orestes, in turn, is pursued by a band of terrifying supernatural creatures, the Furies, who are determined to destroy the matricide. The cycle of violence eases only when wise Athena acknowledges the legitimacy of the Furies' rage and grants them an honored position in her city. Henceforth, the Furies are transformed into Eumenides, "kindly ones," and serve as stalwart guardians of justice in Athens.

Interpreters of this trilogy have been confounded by the question of what made Artemis so angry. It is, after all, the wrath of the goddess that sets the entire plot in motion. Artemis's provocation has been explained in various ways, which we will outline below. But it is significant that Aeschylus himself declines to provide a clear explanation for her anger.

Divine Rage in the Ark Narrative

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, we encounter several enigmatic episodes in which wrath unexpectedly breaks forth from Yhwh, God of Israel.[342] The most extended account of inscrutable divine rage in the Hebrew Bible may be found within the so-called Ark Narrative of 1–2 Samuel. As embodied in the peripatetic Ark, the Israelite deity lashes

[342] To name a few prominent examples: immediately after commissioning Moses as his emissary to Egypt, Yhwh tries to kill him (Exod 4:24–26); fire lashes forth from Yhwh against the sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, striking them dead when they offer "strange fire" before him (Lev 10); in 2 Samuel 24, Yhwh commands King David to take a census but then punishes him for obeying this command, sending a plague that kills 70,000 Israelites.

out against people for seemingly inexplicable reasons. Already in ancient times, interpreters have attempted to rationalize the violence that issues forth from this object. I have assessed these explanations in the previous chapter. Here again, however, our text remains stubbornly opaque as to the cause of the deity's anger.

Approaching the Texts

If we are to respect the reticence of our ancient Greek and Hebrew texts with regard to the cause of divine wrath, how might we proceed in attempting to understand the gods that rage through these tales? Their ambiguity reflects a fundamental—and tremendously frustrating—truth of human experience: We often do not know why we suffer. We may seek answers earnestly and try to change our ways if we can determine our fault. Nevertheless, there remain occasions in which we experience misfortune in spite of our best efforts to conduct ourselves prudently. If we must remain in this state of frustration, ignorant as to the cause of our suffering, must we therefore also adopt an attitude of passive resignation?

One of the most poignant texts from the ancient Near East encapsulates the conundrum of the lonely sufferer. This text, the "Babylonian Prayer to an Unknown God," is beautifully quoted and annotated by Paul Ricoeur:

> The question makes its way through the labyrinths of anguish and dereliction: "Call? No one hears. And that crushes me. Cry out? No one answers. That oppresses me." And the feeling of being abandoned gives a new impulse to confession, which plunges into the depths of forgotten or unknown sins, committed against an unknown god or goddess: "The faults that I have committed I do not know. … The sins that I have committed I

> do not know. … O god, known or unknown, blot out my sins; goddess, known or unknown, blot out my sins."[343]

In some respects, the interpretive task we are undertaking here resembles this searching prayer. At the outset, we accept our inability to determine the cause of the divine wrath that animates these texts. And yet we also cannot keep ourselves from wondering at this vicious rage and attempting to understand it. Like pictures in which some aspect of proportion or perspective is slightly off, these texts captivate our attention, demanding us to look longer, to summon our imaginative resources in an effort to make sense of what we are seeing.

If customary scholarly approaches to divine wrath in *Oresteia* and the Ark Narrative have not yielded satisfying results, it may be because, in attempting to pinpoint a specific reason for the anger of Artemis and Yhwh, interpreters also attempt to dodge the vulnerability that is suffered so acutely by the victims of supernatural wrath in this literature. That is, in treating the texts as logical puzzles to be cleverly solved rather than entering them empathetically, we forfeit the possibility of perceiving their full gravity. Martha Nussbaum articulates this problem brilliantly when she contrasts two literary approaches in ancient Greece: the Platonic model, which seeks to simplify by purely intellectual means through the "philosophical example," and what she calls the Sophoclean, or tragic approach, which she likens to a spider that "advances its understanding of life and of itself … by hovering in thought and imagination around the enigmatic complexities of the seen particular (as we, if we are good readers of this style, hover around the details of the text), seated in the middle of its web of connections,

[343] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 48–49.

responsive to the pull of each separate thread."[344] In Nussbaum's view, to read a tragedy well is to allow oneself to be emotionally affected by it. As she observes, "There is a kind of knowing that works by suffering because suffering is the appropriate acknowledgement of the way human life, in these cases, is. And in general: to grasp either a love or a tragedy by intellect is not sufficient for having real human knowledge of it."[345] I believe that biblical literature, especially texts like the Ark Narrative that resist a strictly logical reading, may also be productively interpreted according to this principle.

To direct our meditation, then, I propose to focus on a single image that recurs throughout the tragedy of *Agamemnon*: the bit. It is my hope that this image will serve as an effective icon, sharpening our attention as we contemplate the workings of divine wrath in the *Oresteia* trilogy. The bit appears three times in *Agamemnon*. In each case, it is figuratively applied to the mouth of a helpless female who suffers a gruesome death. A similar motif accompanies the divine wrath on display in the Ark Narrative. Like *Agamemnon*, the Ark Narrative is punctuated by three episodes featuring distressed females whose deaths are described in the biblical text. The reproductive status of these females is also emphasized: they are pregnant, nursing, or barren. In what follows, I set these emotionally charged scenes side by side—the three images of the bit in *Agamemnon*, and the afflicted wombs pictured in the Ark Narrative—and examine them against each other, with the goal of tracing a pattern that points the way toward a more nuanced understanding of the inscrutable divine wrath featured in both tales.

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[344] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 69.

[345] Ibid., 45.

1. A Cursed Birthday

The Bit in *Agamemnon*: Troy as a Pregnant Rabbit

The first time the bit is mentioned in *Agamemnon*, it is applied proleptically to the conquered city of Troy. Just as Agamemnon and Menelaus are venturing forth for battle, an extraordinary natural event occurs in full view of the troops. Two fearsome predatory birds—one black, one white—descend upon a pregnant rabbit, ripping open her womb and devouring the helpless hare together with her unborn young. The seer Calchas, who accompanies the army, provides an interpretation of this omen. He recognizes the two birds as Agamemnon and Menelaus, and the pregnant rabbit as the city of Troy that will be sacked by the invading Greek army. Although such a reading of the signs would seem to be propitious for Agamemnon's military expedition, the omen also contains a foreboding element. Holy Artemis is incensed at the spectacle. Apprehending this, Calchas proclaims: "may it not happen that some resentment sent by the gods may cloud over and ruin the mighty bit[346] forged for Troy's mouth by the army."[347]

Let us pause here to consider the cause of Artemis's wrath in greater detail. As Aeschylus presents it, Artemis is clearly angered at the omen: "For holy Artemis, out of pity, bears a grudge against the winged hounds of her Father who slaughtered the

[346] The word translated "bit" here (στόμιον) is not the most common noun used to designate bit (χαλινός); a diminutive of στόμα, "mouth," στόμιον literally means "little mouth." For a detailed philological discussion of this passage, see John Lavery, "A Forge Metaphor in *Agamemnon*?" *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 73 (2003): 93–101.

[347] Lines 132–33. This translation is taken from Gregory Nagy's online sourcebook for his Harvard course, "The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours." The translation is by Samuel Butler, revised by Gregory Nagy, et al. It may be accessed on the course website, https://www.edx.org/course/ancient-greek-hero-24-hours-harvardx-hum2x. Elsewhere I also quote from the Loeb Classical Library (LCL) edition of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, translated by Alan H. Sommerstein (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

wretched hare, litter and all, before it could give birth; she loathes the eagles' feast."[348] The "winged hounds" are the predatory birds, which correspond to the Greek kings summoned by Zeus to attack Troy. By sending the ill wind to interfere with the plans of Agamemnon and Menelaus, we may deduce that Artemis's anger has been transferred from the birds themselves to the kings they represent. If the rabbit is to be identified as Troy, are we then to suppose that Artemis is angered in advance at the destruction the Greek kings would inflict upon the city of Troy? But why should this offend her so deeply? After all, Zeus willed the attack against Troy for good reason: Paris, son of King Priam, had seduced Menelaus's wife Helen and absconded with her to Troy after his visit to Argos. A clear violation of the sacred bond between guest and host, this is an act deserving of punishment.

Scholars have debated the precise cause of Artemis's provocation.[349] Some believe Artemis is angry with Agamemnon for a reason not mentioned in the present tragedy. In certain ancient Greek traditions, Artemis becomes enraged at Agamemnon after he shoots a stag and boastfully claims that his prowess in hunting exceeds that of Artemis. Other scholars convincingly argue that we should not seek a reason for Artemis's anger in a separate literary work under the assumption that the ancient audience would have known about it. As Fraenkel states in his commentary, "It must be regarded as an established and indeed a guiding principle for any interpretation of Aeschylus that the poet does not want us to take into account any feature of a tradition

[348] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 134–36 (Sommerstein, LCL).

[349] A sample of the longstanding scholarly debate on Artemis's anger may be found in William Whallon, "Why Is Artemis Angry?" *AJP* 82 (1961): 78–88; and Stuart E. Lawrence, "Artemis in the Agamemnon," *AJP* 97 (1976): 97–110.

which he does not mention."[350]

Numerous interpreters maintain that Artemis is angry with Agamemnon for the horrific acts of warfare he and his troops would commit against the citizens of Troy, especially the defenseless young ones. Advocates of this view sometimes point out that Artemis indicates a preference for Troy in the *Iliad*.[351] But again, it may be advisable to restrict our evidence to that which is presented by Aeschylus in the work at hand. Others have proposed that Artemis is not infuriated with Agamemnon at all, but with the predatory birds of the omen itself. That is, her compassion is for the rabbits only, and not for Troy by extension. But if she is angry at the birds and not at Agamemnon, why then does Artemis send winds to oppose the Greek army? One scholar, Alan Sommerstein, has suggested that the rage of Artemis is not triggered by the acts of Agamemnon, but by those of her father, Zeus, who commanded the attack on the rabbits and on Troy. Since she cannot retaliate against Zeus directly, Artemis unleashes her anger on his human devotee, Agamemnon. According to Sommerstein, the cause of Artemis's anger is almost irrelevant: "Her dramatic function is simply to create a dilemma for Agamemnon, and the matter of real interest is how he copes with the difficulty."[352]

Even if we cannot infer exactly why or how the wrath of Artemis was provoked, it is safe to say that Aeschylus presents the omen as the immediate cause of her anger. In this warped birthing scene, the miserable rabbit does not bear living offspring but instead generates a tenacious lethal curse. Calchas foresees the wrath that will seize Agamemnon,

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[350] Eduard Fraenkel, ed. and trans., *Agamemnon*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950), 97.

[351] Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "The Guilt of Agamemnon," *CQ* 12 (1962): 187–99, at 190.

[352] Alan H. Sommerstein, "Artemis in Agamemnon: A Postscript," *AJP* 101 (1980): 165–69, at 168.

"for there awaits, to arise hereafter, a fearsome, guileful keeper of the house, a Wrath [*Mēnis*] that remembers and will avenge a child."[353]

Afflicted Wombs in the Ark Narrative: Wife of Phinehas

In the final verses of 1 Samuel 4, the death of a pregnant female likewise marks a devastating military defeat. It also portends the outbreak of a divine wrath that will mangle many human lives. She is not a rabbit, but a woman—the wife of Phinehas, a priest freshly killed in battle against the Philistines along with thirty thousand other Israelites. The news of her husband's death, however terrible, does not appear to be this woman's primary concern. Rather, her distress centers on another loss, the Ark of the Covenant, which has been captured by the Philistines. When she learns the outcome of the battle, the woman is overwhelmed with birth pangs and immediately goes into labor. We are told, ותשׁמע את־השׁמעה אל־הלקח ארון האלהים ומת חמיה ואישׁה ותכרע ותלד כי־נהפכו עליה צריה, "Upon hearing the report concerning the capture of the Ark of God, and the death of her father-in-law and husband, she crouched down and gave birth, for her pains turned upon her" (1 Sam 4:19).

Here the routine physical pains of labor are intertwined with the affliction this news unleashes against the pregnant widow. The roiling of her womb is a visceral response to the horror of loss. The midwives try to cheer her by announcing the birth of a baby boy: "Don't worry," they tell her, "you've born a son!" (אל־תיראי כי בן ילדת). But in the moment that should be her greatest joy, the new mother is inconsolable: ולא ענתה ולא־

[353] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 154–55 (Sommerstein, LCL). Regarding this prophecy, Sommerstein notes that "the coming sacrifice of Iphigeneia is half-identified with the wrath it will generate, which in turn is half-identified with the person … in whom that wrath will reside" (19n33).

שׁתה לבה, “She did not respond; she paid no attention” (1 Sam 4:20). A menstruating woman who suffers the bleeding shedding of her womb is designated “wounded by a weapon” in certain Mesopotamian medical texts.[354] If the menstruant is wounded, the woman in labor may be imagined as a warrior battling ferociously in the vanguard, and the one who dies in childbirth as a soldier slain by the enemy. In this scene, the wife of Phinehas bleeds and dies as though she, too, had been cut down in battle that day alongside her husband and so many others.

Before she dies, the woman manages to name her baby. But whether she even looks at the poor child is unclear. The name may simply echo her distracted dying words: Ichabod, a plaintive question meaning, “Where is the glory?” As she laments, גלה כבוד מישׂראל כי נלקח ארון האלהים, “Glory is exiled from Israel, for the Ark of God has been captured” (1 Sam 4:22). Encapsulated in this nameless woman’s act of naming is the profound sense of desolation suffered by the community in the absence of their god. It is the divine glory in the form of the Ark that had oriented the Israelites through their wilderness wandering and that led and protected them against their enemies. Without it, they are utterly abandoned.

[354] As noted by Rivkah Harris (*Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia* [Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000], 92), who directs our attention to texts listed in CAD M/174b (ibid., 214n31). For a discussion on a biblical comparison of warriors and women in labor, see Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, “Like Warrior, Like Woman: Destruction and Deliverance in Isaiah 42:10–17,” *CBQ* 49 (1987): 560–71.

2. Screaming Sacrificial Victims

The Bit in *Agamemnon*: Iphigeneia

The ominous premonition of Calchas is fulfilled when Artemis musters winds to blow against Agamemnon's ships, making it impossible for him to proceed to Troy. Trapped on lurching vessels, the Greek troops suffer terribly under the adverse wind that pins them in the harbor. They get violently sick; they start to go mad. At last, the possibility of relief emerges. Realizing that no good option is available, the king seizes upon a horrific resolution. To make Artemis shift the winds and permit the mission to Troy, Agamemnon consents to sacrifice his young daughter Iphigeneia.

Though she screams and begs him to stop, the king will not be deterred. As if she were an animal, he has Iphigeneia bound and bitted to restrain her voice and limbs.

> For her supplications, her cries of "Father," and her virgin life, the commanders in their eagerness for war cared nothing. Her father, after a prayer, told his ministers to raise her—fallen about her robes, she lay face-down in supplication with all her heart—to lift her like a young goat, high above the altar; and with a gag upon her lovely mouth to hold back the shouted curse against her house by the bit's strong and stifling might (βίᾳ χαλινῶν τ᾽ ἀναύδῳ μένει).[355]

Even though Artemis relents and adjusts the winds after Agamemnon kills his daughter, allowing him to venture forth and capture Troy, the rage of Artemis intensifies rather than abates at the slaughter of the defenseless virgin with the bit in her mouth.[356] As

[355] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 228–38 (Butler, Heroes Sourcebook). I have translated the Greek θυμός, which is left transliterated in the sourcebook, as "heart."

[356] Cf. the supernatural wrath generated by the sacrifice of the Moabite king's son according to the biblical account of 2 Kings 3. Just as the Israelites are on the verge of overthrowing the last Moabite stronghold, their seemingly guaranteed victory is abruptly halted when King Mesha sacrifices his firstborn son on the city wall. Immediately following this act, ויהי קצף־גדול על־ישׂראל ויסעו מעליו וישׁבו לארץ, "there was a great wrath against Israel, and they withdrew from him and went back to their own land" (2 Kgs 3:27).

Calchas had prophesied, the goddess's anger manifests in the violent designs of Clytemnestra, who patiently awaits her husband's return, planning all the while his spectacularly bloody homecoming.

Afflicted Wombs in the Ark Narrative: Milch Cows

The captured Ark of Yhwh wreaks such havoc in Philistine territory that the elders finally decide to expel their hard-won battle trophy. To determine whether the source of their torment really is the God of Israel, the Philistine leaders devise a test. They place the Ark on a new cart, along with offerings to signify the plagues they've suffered—five gold mice, and five gold tumors corresponding to the number of their cities. The Philistines yoke to the cart two cows, new mothers that are still nursing. Their calves, meanwhile, are penned up behind them. No human drives the cart or attends to it. The Philistines reason that, if these cows go against every ounce of their maternal instinct by traveling toward Israelite territory and away from their calves, then the pestilence must have come from the Israelite deity.

This is, in fact, what happens. The cows proceed on the road, lowing as they go—in protest, it would seem—against the force that relentlessly pushes them along. The animals are pictured as possessed, driven against their will by an eerie supernatural hand that compels them to abandon their needy offspring. As it turns out, this mournful journey is also their death march, for when they arrive at Beth-Shemesh and deliver the sacred Ark to the Israelites, the cows are promptly slaughtered as a sacrifice to Yhwh.

Like the struggling Iphigeneia, these decidedly unwilling female bodies solve a national dilemma and enable transportation between home and enemy territory. The

sudden shift of the winds, and the arrow-straight path of the cows confirm what the Greek and Philistine leaders had already suspected: their adversity stems from the wrath of a particular deity. But just as Iphigeneia's sacrifice fails to extinguish the burning wrath of Artemis, so the slaying of the cows does not propitiate Yhwh. Perhaps the rage of the Israelite god even intensifies at the slaughter. Whatever his reason or emotional state, Yhwh lashes out and kills more than fifty thousand Israelites at Beth-Shemesh. Appalled, the residents of the town send the Ark of Yhwh to their neighbors in Kiriath-jearim. Then, for some time, the Ark is quiet.

3. The Captive Bride

The Bit in *Agamemnon*: Cassandra

Agamemnon and his troops endure many hardships in the campaign against Troy. And yet, having been permitted to undertake his mission, Agamemnon may well have imagined that he had shaken off the tiresome burden of Artemis's wrath. When the king returns to Argos triumphant, he certainly regards himself as divinely blessed: he proclaims, "Now I will enter my palace, come to the hearth of my home, and as my first act greet the gods who sped me on my way and have brought me back. And may victory, since she has followed me thus far, remain with me always!"[357] But as we are well aware, at least one of the gods responsible for speeding him along is not kindly disposed toward the war hero. The wrath of Artemis had only been lying dormant, and would soon arise to dispel the short-lived joy of his victory.

[357] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 851–54 (Sommerstein, LCL).

When Agamemnon arrives in Argos, he is accompanied by a captive, Cassandra, daughter of King Priam of Troy. Clytemnestra emerges from the palace to greet them, showering her husband with effusive praise and assuring Cassandra that she would enjoy impeccable hospitality in their household. But when the queen invites Cassandra to follow Agamemnon into the palace, the girl remains motionless in the carriage. Upon further cajoling, Cassandra still does not follow the king but starts thrashing about wildly. Unsure at first whether the foreigner understands Greek, Clytemnestra finally gives up on trying to welcome her, concluding: "No, she is mad and listens to her wild mood, since she has come here from a newly captured city, and does not know how to tolerate the bit (χαλινόν) until she has foamed away her fretfulness in blood. No! I will waste no more words upon her to be insulted thus."[358]

From his hard-won battle at Troy, Agamemnon brings home a sort of substitute daughter, another subjugated female with a bit in her mouth. After Clytemnestra leaves the girl outside and follows her husband into the palace, Cassandra begins to speak. Her gifts of premonition allow her to see all the slaughter in the haunted house of Atreus, including her own. At these gory visions, Cassandra cries out, "Apollo, Apollo! God of the Streets, and my destroyer! Ah, where on earth, what kind of house, have you brought me to?"[359]

Cassandra then approaches the door of the palace. At this point, the Argive elders ask her a sensible question: "but if you truly have foreknowledge of your own death, how

[358] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1064–68 (Butler, Heroes Sourcebook).

[359] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1085–87 (Sommerstein, LCL).

comes it that you are walking boldly towards it like an ox driven by god to the altar?"[360] Mirroring the biblical milch cows, the prophetess walks straight toward her death, eerily compelled by an otherworldly force. Cassandra realizes that her demise is inevitable, but she does not go willingly to the slaughter. Rather, she curses as she walks, articulating the words that the bit had prevented the previous daughter, Iphigeneia, from saying.

The captive's dreadful vision is realized when Clytemnestra succeeds in murdering her husband, and Cassandra alongside him. And so the matriarch kills a substitute daughter in exchange for Iphigeneia's blood. But if the sacrifice of the muzzled virgin is avenged in this act, the course of divine rage only gains in momentum. After she kills Agamemnon, Clytemnestra stands defiantly before the horrified elders, who sense that this wrath has not yet been fully satisfied. As they declare, "Truly it is a great spirit of grievous wrath [*barumēnin*] … that you tell of—ah, ah, an evil tale to tell!—insatiable in its appetite for ruinous events … and all by the will of Zeus" (1481–85).[361] The bitter curse uttered by Cassandra on the verge of her slaying in the final scenes of *Agamemnon* guarantees that violence will continue to ricochet from wall to wall within the wretched house of Atreus.

Afflicted Wombs in the Ark Narrative: Michal

After the outburst against Uzzah, David aborts his effort to usher the Ark of the Covenant into his capital, placing the Ark in the custody of Obed-Edom the Gittite. But three months later, when he learns that the household of Obed-Edom has been blessed, the king

[360] Ibid., 1296–98.

[361] Ibid., 181.

ventures once more to bring the holy object to Jerusalem. Again, the procession of the Ark is accompanied with great fanfare, including sacrifices, blasting horns, and shouting. King David himself, dressed in the linen garb of a priest, dances ecstatically before the Ark. This second attempt to secure the Ark of God proves successful, and with much rejoicing, David places the Ark in the tent he had prepared for it in his capital.

Upon David's return to the palace, his wife Michal does not greet him as a hero but berates his boisterous (and apparently semi-nude) display as outlandish and obscene. She declares sarcastically,

מה־נכבד היום מלך ישׂראל אשׁר נגלה היום לעיני אמהות עבדיו כהגלות נגלות אחד הרקים

"How honored is the king of Israel today! The one who exposed himself today in the sight of his servants' girls—totally exposed, like one of the riffraff!" (2 Sam 6:20). To her scorn, David retorts:

לפני יהוה אשׁר בחר־בי מאביך ומכל־ביתו לצות אתי נגיד על־עם יהוה על־ישׂראל ושׂחקתי לפני יהוה:
ונקלתי עוד מזאת והייתי שׁפל בעיני ועם־האמהות אשׁר אמרת עמם אכבדה:

"It was before Yhwh—who chose me over your father and over his whole household, appointing me as prince over the people of Yhwh, over Israel—before Yhwh that I rejoiced! I may be even more humiliated than this, and become despicable to myself, but among those girls you mentioned, among them I shall be honored!" (2 Sam 6:21–22). Immediately following this bitter confrontation, we are told that Michal לא־היה לה ילד עד יום מותה, "had no child until the day that she died" (2 Sam 6:23).

Ostensibly, it is Michal who is cursed for upbraiding Yhwh's anointed king. After all, David begets numerous children by other women, whereas Michal remains barren.[362] But we are not privy to the precise cause of Michal's childlessness. Perhaps, as many have suggested, Yhwh closed the queen's womb as punishment for her disdainful attitude towards David.[363] It is also possible that her childlessness may be due to a cessation of sexual activity between David and Michal, either prior to this dispute or as a result of it. Here, too, it is not clear whether David or Michal would be more likely to refuse to engage in conjugal relations, and to what purpose. Of course, had David impregnated the daughter of Saul, this would complicate the story as we have it. Michal's child would have been Saul's grandchild; had such an heir succeeded David as king, then it would not be so easy to claim that Yhwh had chosen David over the whole house of Saul. David's sharp retort to Michal would thereby be dulled. Perhaps David denied Michal sexual relations after their dispute for this very reason, to ensure his rebuttal would stand and that no royal heir would come from Saul's household.

On the other hand, such a deliberate quashing of Saul's potential offspring might implicate David in another way. Back when Saul was still king over Israel but realized that David would reign after him, he made David swear an oath:

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[362] It should be noted, however, that in the MT of 2 Sam 21:8, Michal is said to have given birth to five sons. This is generally understood as a reference to Michal's sister Merab, and for good reason. The name of the man who fathered these sons is Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite, but there is no record of Michal having had a third husband by this name. Rather, 1 Sam 18:19 reports that Merab was given in marriage to Adriel the Meholathite. Since the names of both sisters begin with the same letter, it would make sense that a scribe might have accidentally written the name of the better-known daughter of Saul here. Incidentally, David delivered these five nephews, plus two other sons of Saul, to the Gibeonites, who impaled them on a mountain (2 Sam 21:9).

[363] Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Yhwh is presented as directly responsible for a woman's fertility, opening and closing up wombs: Gen 20:18; 29:31; 30:2, 22; 1 Sam 1:5–6, Isa 66:9.

ועתה השׁבעה לי ביהוה אם־תכרית את־זרעי אחרי ואם־תשׁמיד את־שׁמי מבית אבי

"Now swear to me by Yhwh that you will not cut off my seed after me, that you will not destroy my name from my father's household" (1 Sam 24:22). Had David intentionally withheld his seed from Michal, he could be charged with violating this sacred vow.[364] In this case, Michal's childlessness may signal a curse against David.[365] Interestingly, the parallel account in Chronicles makes no mention of Michal's childlessness, though it does note that she scorns David when she sees him dancing before the Ark (1 Chron 15:29). Considering the pronounced tendency of the Chronicler to present David in a favorable light, the fact that this detail does not appear in Chronicles might imply that the author regarded Michal's barrenness as reflecting poorly on the king himself.

In fact, following the dispute between David and Michal, the king's career suffers a sharp decline from which it never fully recovers. Not only does Yhwh reject the king's offer to build him a temple (2 Samuel 7), but soon afterward David initiates a sordid affair with Uriah's wife, which results in explicit curses against David's household, including the death of the first son Bathsheba bears him (2 Samuel 11–12).[366] Unsurprisingly, the account of this affair between David and Bathsheba is omitted in the book of Chronicles.

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[364] A similar situation is described in Genesis 38, where Onan deliberately "spills his seed" on the ground in order to avoid impregnating his brother's widow Tamar. For Onan's refusal to fulfill his fraternal duty and continue the name of his brother, Yhwh strikes him dead.

[365] On the other hand, this vow might only bind David to refrain from killing off all of Saul's offspring. Even though David allows Saul's seven sons to be impaled by the Gibeonites, the king does spare the life of one of Saul's descendants, Jonathan's son Mephibosheth (2 Sam 21:7). Thus, David may not have broken this vow, risking the wrath of Yhwh, even if he had deliberately withheld his seed from Michal.

[366] It is unclear exactly how much time passed between the ushering of the Ark into Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6) and the Bathsheba affair (2 Samuel 11). But the events are described within several chapters of each other, so in this sense at least, they can be said to occur in relatively close proximity.

How can we account for the hostile attitude of Queen Michal, then, in relation to David's treatment of the Ark? Most scholars surmise that the royal lady is primarily upset because the dynasty of her father Saul has been eclipsed by David's rule. It is also frequently suggested that Michal is experiencing sexual jealousy at her husband's scantily clad dance performance in front of the maidens as he accompanies the Ark. But it seems to me that Michal's resentment toward David runs much deeper.

I propose that the struggle between David and Michal corresponds in some way to David's wrestling with the dangerous divine presence that animates the Ark. A similar mirroring of a protagonist's contentious relationship with divine and human realms alike may be found in the story of Jacob. In Genesis 32, Jacob fearfully anticipates an encounter with his brother Esau, who previously had sought to kill Jacob after his younger twin tricked him out of his birthright and blessing (Gen 25; 27). Immediately thereafter, Jacob engages in a nocturnal wrestling match with a divine figure at the Jabbok, who injures his hip; Jacob refuses to let his opponent go until he agrees to bless him. In Genesis 33, Jacob faces his brother at long last, and to his surprise, Esau greets him with joy instead of hostility. As Mark S. Smith has observed, "The two chapters set up a parallelism of Jacob's two struggles, one with his brother Esau, another with God."[367]

Back when David was just a scrappy shepherd making a name for himself as a warrior in Israel, we are told that one of King Saul's daughters, Michal, loved him. The king offers his daughter's hand to David but requests a formidable bride price: a hundred Philistine foreskins. Threatened by the young upstart, Saul hopes David will meet his

[367] Mark S. Smith, "The Three Bodies of God in the Hebrew Bible," *JBL* 134 (2015): 471–88, at 477.

death attempting to collect the bride price. But David prevails and marries Michal. Eventually, the king's aggression forces David into exile. In David's absence, Saul marries Michal off to another man, Paltiel. But after the death of Saul, when David is fiercely competing for the throne, he demands that Michal be returned to him:

וישלח דוד מלאכים אל־איש־בשת בן־שאול לאמר תנה את־אשתי את־מיכל אשר ארשתי לי במאה ערלות פלשתים: וישלח איש בשת ויקחה מעם איש מעם פלטיאל בן־ליש: וילך אתה אישה הלוך ובכה אחריה עד־בחרים ויאמר אליו אבנר לך שוב וישב:

> Then David sent messengers to Ishboshet, the son of Saul, saying, "Give me my wife, Michal, whom I betrothed at the price of a hundred Philistine foreskins." Ishboshet sent and took her from her husband, from Paltiel son of Laish. Her husband went with her, weeping all the while as he walked behind her as far as Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, "Go back!" So he went back. (2 Sam 3:14–16)

It is illuminating to compare the procession of Michal with two others we have already discussed: that of the milch cows and that of the Ark. The simultaneous walking and crying of Paltiel is expressed by the same Hebrew grammatical construction used to describe the bovine mothers that pull the Ark toward Beth-Shemesh, all the while lowing sorrowfully for their abandoned calves. In 2 Sam 3:16, Paltiel's procession is described as follows: וילך אתה אישה הלוך ובכה, lit.: "her husband walked with her, walking and weeping." The milch cows proceed in a similar manner according to 1 Sam 6:12, הלכו הלך וגעו, lit.: "they walked, walking and lowing." Both descriptions use the inflected verb הלך "to walk" followed by two absolute infinitives, one from הלך and a second verb, indicating that the subject (the cows, Paltiel) performs some activity simultaneous to

walking.[368] As a vocalization expressing unwillingness, the lowing of the cows (געו) is the animal equivalent to human weeping (בכה).

Our text offers no insight as to how Michal might have felt about being removed from her second husband and returned to David, but Paltiel weeps over the loss of Michal in the same manner a tender mother mourns the baby torn from her breast. David, on the other hand, treats Michal as a commodity. He refers to her not as the woman he loves, but as the bride he bought.

Following her return to David, we hear no word about Queen Michal until the moment she looks out the palace window to see David dancing before the Ark, and bitterly despises him. For Michal, the procession of the Ark to Jerusalem may recall her own forced journey from the husband who loved her. After all, it was to lend legitimacy to his bid for kingship that David sought to secure the presence of Saul's daughter as his queen in Jerusalem. For the same reason—to enhance the prestige of his reign—David perseveres in bringing the Ark of God to his capital, despite the fact that the Ark had violently resisted during David's first attempt to transport it there.

After expressing hostility towards the festive procession orchestrated by David, Michal vanishes from public view. We are told she remains childless unto death, and there her story ends. As for the Ark, after being ceremoniously led into the temple built by David's son Solomon, this formerly dynamic protagonist is scarcely heard from again.

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[368] The same grammatical construction is also used three times in relation to the Ark in Joshua 6 (v. 9 and twice in v. 13), where the priests who walk in front of the Ark around Jericho proceed while blowing shofars. I quote the fullest description of the procession that appears in Josh 6:13: ושבעה הכהנים נשׂאים שבעה שׁופרות היבלים לפני ארון יהוה הלכים הלוך ותקעו בשׁופרות, "Now the seven priests who carried the seven shofar-horns in front of the Ark of Yhwh were walking along, walking and blowing the shofars." Again, here we have a case of the infinitive absolute הלוך is used with the verb הלך "to walk/go" and another conjugated verb, here ותקעו, "they blew." This verbal construction highlights the importance of processions in relation to the Ark.

Having been wrangled into Jerusalem and settled in the temple, the Ark appears to retire from the prominent role it had once played in the life of the Israelite community. King David has triumphed over the house of Saul and over the unpredictable Ark.

Instead of interpreting Michal's scorn towards David simply as the grumbling of a sore loser, however, we might consider whether there is something disturbing about the king's path to glory. In this case, an excerpt from another Greek tragedy, Sophocles's *Antigone*, may be illuminating. The chorus hails the resourcefulness of King Creon, using poetic language to describe his impressive achievements. At the end of the speech, however, their apparent admiration sharply turns to disgust, as if they are revolted by his cunning:

> There are many *deinon* [terrifying] things, but not one of them is more *deinon* than the human being. … And the race of light-headed birds, and the tribes of savage beasts, and the sea-dwelling brood of the deep, he snares with the meshes of his twisted net and leads captive, cunning man. He masters with his arts the beasts of the open air, walkers on hills. The horse with his shaggy mane he tames, yoking him about the neck, and the tireless mountain bull. … He has a resource for everything … he is a man of lofty city; citiless the person who lives with what is not noble in his rash daring. May he never share my hearth, may he never think as I do, the one who does these things.[369]

Michal is not granted such an eloquent speech, but it would seem Antigone's chorus expresses well her fraught feelings towards David. She may have once loved the heroic youth who wrangled wild animals, slayed Philistines, and even singlehandedly took on a giant in his daring. But then, having been led captive herself to David's city, and watching as the king marches in yet another formerly powerful creature to settle in his lofty city—all the while leaping ecstatically as adoring young women look on—we can imagine that Michal would no longer wish to share her hearth with him. There is

[369] As quoted in Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 72–73.

something inhuman about a man who will not lose. Sickened at the ceaseless championing of the champion, Michal rejects the one who conquered queens and gods. From this perspective, it is little wonder she bears him no son.

Rage Transformed: From Furies to Kindly Ones in *Oresteia*

After she kills her husband, Clytemnestra suffers a terrifying dream: she has again given birth, but this time it is a snake that slithers forth from her womb. When she offers her breast to the newborn, its teeth puncture her flesh and blood streams out, mixing with her milk. Clytemnestra's grim nocturnal vision is fulfilled when Orestes plunges a sword into her throat to avenge the life of his father.

Then it is Orestes's turn to be haunted by his bloodshed. The matricide is relentlessly pursued by a band of Furies, the saddest creatures of all: "old women, ancient children, with whom no god, no man, no beast ever consorts."[370] The bloodlust of these desolate females is the culmination of the tenacious anger of Artemis. As if in homage to the huntress who initiated their rage, the Furies form a grisly hunting party to track down the fugitive. After being stalked through the land, Orestes at last takes refuge in the temple of Athena, clinging to her statue in supplication.

When Athena arrives home to her temple, she is astonished to see a bloodstained stranger beside her statue, surrounded by a band of grotesque creatures. Befitting her role as goddess of wisdom, Athena handles the situation with grace and poise. She addresses her freakish guests with respect, and so the Furies agree to let her try their case against the suppliant. Athena realizes the danger of the arbitration, for "if they do not get a

[370] Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 69–70 (Butler, Heroes Sourcebook).

victorious outcome, the poison that will afterwards fall from their outraged pride into the soil will be an unbearable, unending plague for the land."[371] When the jury convened by Athena releases Orestes from his bloodguilt, the Furies go berserk. As they hurl at her violent shrieking threats, Athena persists in speaking kindly to them, insisting that the Furies have not been dishonored by the verdict and offering them a home and a powerful position in her city. After an extended verbal exchange, Athena manages to persuade these fearsome ladies to take up residence in a special underground abode where they would assist in governing the city of Athens and receive abundant sacrifices from the citizens.

The goddess of wisdom does not ask these females to abandon their fury. Rather, she requests that they nurture and discipline their precious rage, so that it may be used to promote a healthy fear of justice in Athens. As the Furies allow themselves to be calmed by Athena's kind words, the cycle of retaliatory violence that had gripped the house of Atreus finally dissolves.

What the Bits and Wombs Tell Us

In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the bit serves as an apt metaphor for the dominance Agamemnon exerts over female lives. For, as anyone with experience in horsemanship is well aware, the bit does not give the rider full control of the animal. Horses do not always respond to the bit in the way they are meant to. If a horse is untrained or terrified, the animal will balk at the signals sent through the bit. In such cases, the pain inflicted by the pressure of the metal is not an effective language of leadership. It may even be

[371] Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 477–79 (Sommerstein, LCL).

counterproductive, exacerbating rather than curbing the animal's rage.[372] In the hand of Agamemnon, the bit backfires. Even if it effectively prevents a tortured girl from uttering malevolent words, it cannot suppress Iphigeneia's curse, which swells from her body and stains the king's expedition.

Agamemnon's victorious homecoming from Troy should represent the pinnacle of his kingship. So, too, 2 Samuel 6 describes a powerful monarch who has overcome formidable obstacles. David has subdued the Philistines, reclaimed his royal wife, and above all, succeeded in escorting the fearsome Ark of the Covenant to his capital. But the triumph of Agamemnon and David would soon deteriorate. In both cases, the imminent decline of the king is heralded by disingenuous praise proclaimed by the queen upon his homecoming. Although the downfall of David is not as dramatic as the fate suffered by Agamemnon at the hands of Clytemnestra, nevertheless it appears that Michal's scornful words inaugurate a change in the king's fortunes.

After David wrangles the Ark into Jerusalem and forcibly separates two women from their sympathetic husbands—Michal from the weeping Paltiel, and Bathsheba from Uriah by killing off the noble warrior after impregnating his wife—the royal household experiences violent treachery. It is perhaps relevant that Uriah is depicted not only as a brave military leader, but also as a faithful attendant of Yhwh's Ark. Despite the urging of the king, Uriah refuses to go to his house and have sex with his wife while the Ark

[372] In the *Hippolytus* of Euripides, we find a brilliant picture of terrified horses that can no longer be made to respond to the guidance of the most skilled horseman. A messenger reports the disaster that befell cursed Hippolytus: "All at once a terrible panic fell upon the horses. My master, who had lived long with the ways of horses, seized the reins in his hands and pulled them, as a sailor pulls an oar, letting his body hang backwards from the straps. But they took the fire-wrought bit in their teeth and carried him against his will, paying no heed to their captain's hand or the harness or the tight-glued chariot" (Euripides, *Hippolytus*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs, LCL 484 [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995], lines 1217–25).

remains on the battlefield (2 Sam 11:11). David, meanwhile, has been content to remain in his palace during the entire course of the war, lustfully summoning the wife of one of his soldiers. Perhaps this is another instance where David's imperious treatment of a woman is deliberately paired with his treatment of the Ark. In both cases, the upshot is similar: a kind of curse is inflicted upon the wombs of his wives. Michal is barren, whereas Bathsheba's pregnancy is doomed. Yhwh smites her newborn, and so the baby becomes sick and dies (2 Sam 12:15–18).

David goes on to sire additional children, and Bathsheba bears him another son, Solomon. But the story of David's relationship with his sons is strained, to say the least. One of David's sons, Amnon, commits incestuous rape against his sister Tamar (2 Sam 13). Another son, Absalom, murders Amnon for this act and then makes a concerted effort to overthrow David, driving the king from Jerusalem and violating David's concubines in full view of the people (2 Sam 14–16). Even though David manages to regain his throne from Absalom, the remainder of his rule is riddled with unfortunate events, including plague, famine, and renewed conflict with the Philistines. Eventually, David's son Solomon succeeds him on the throne, builds a glorious temple for the Ark, and presides over a golden age in Israel. But we should not be quick to forget the turmoil of the Davidic household prior to the rise of Solomon. In many ways, the house of David appears to have been gripped by a supernatural curse rivaling the one that plagued the house of Atreus.

The Ark Narrative and the *Oresteia* trilogy alike may be read as a war of the sexes told through a layered tunnel of bleeding wombs: slain, invaded, or wasted. It is no

wonder that from this gutted tangle a band of Furies rises to testify: Certain things cannot, must not be forgiven.

How then are we to understand the happy resolution of divine wrath in these tales? Like the Furies who immigrate peaceably to Athens, the violence of the Ark is transformed into a benevolent force when it comes to rest in Solomon's temple. From their dark abodes—underground in Athens and within the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem—these placated divine beings no longer inflict death, but rather their presence offers protection, inspiring a reverent fear that promotes justice in the city.

But something about the domestication of these raging gods feels disappointing. We may be relieved at the cessation of retaliatory violence, but what about those victims whose sufferings are never avenged? What of the murdered mothers, the raped and slain daughters? Must their affliction be regarded as collateral damage, swept under the rug of a supposedly greater national good? It should be acknowledged, however, that the wild divine rage coursing through our texts did not lead to justice, but only compounded human suffering.

In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the bit is portrayed as an instrument of oppression that seals the doom of captive females. Properly applied, however, the bit can facilitate a satisfying relationship between stronger and weaker parties. In another Greek tragedy, Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus* (406 BCE), the chorus informs the blind traveler Oedipus that he has arrived at "the most potent inhabitation on earth," the city of Colonus, which contains "the gift of the great superhuman force. … It has the good power of horses, the good power of colts, the good power of the sea." The chorus explains that the city enjoys a special communion with the divine realm because a certain

technology was first introduced there, namely "the bit (χαλινὸν) that cures the rage of horses."[373]

Instead of viewing justice in terms of simple retaliation—a man sins, and then a god automatically punishes him—we might consider it in terms of an interspecies relationship mediated by a small metal object. The bit does not function like a button on a machine. Rather, the one who wishes to ride a horse well must keep a supple hand on the reins, remembering that she is connected to a sensitive and unpredictable living being. Imagining a given deity as a horse, whose raging energy is both precious and dangerous, offers us a different picture of pious attention. The rage of the horse must be assiduously disciplined in order to channel its energy in a way that benefits its human rider. If we treat the bit as an instrument of communion, we respect the agency of the other and honor our own vulnerability. To apply the bit as a means of coercion, on the other hand, is not only ineffective, it is a travesty of the sacred bond that connects us.

[373] Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 710–14 (Butler, Heroes Sourcebook).

CONCLUSION

AFTERLIVES OF THE ARK

It is fitting that my dissertation defense is scheduled for August 15, as this is the date on which the Feast of the Assumption is celebrated in the Catholic Church, known as the Dormition of the Theotokos—that is, the "falling asleep of the mother of God"—in the Eastern Orthodox Church.[374] Already in the first centuries of Christianity, the mother of Jesus was envisioned as the new Ark of the Covenant, since she housed the divine presence within her womb. The concept of Mary as Ark of God is articulated and developed in Patristic homilies delivered on the occasion of the Virgin's Dormition. John of Damascus (ca. 675–749 CE) offers a poetic account of Mary's death in one of his homilies for the feast. He imagines the body of Mary as the Ark, and her soul as a dove:

> Today the sacred dove, the pure and innocent soul who was also purified by the Holy Spirit, has flown from the ark—I mean from that body which received God and is the source of our life; and she has found "a place of rest for her feet" (Gen 8:9), flying up to the intelligible world and pitching her tent in the spotless land of our heritage on high.[375]

The earliest hint of the association between Mary and the Ark may be found in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke. In this account, the newly pregnant Mary goes to stay with her relative Elizabeth. According to Luke 1:56, Mary remained with Elizabeth for about three months. The specific time period is potentially significant for two reasons.

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[374] For this reason, August 15 is also Mother's Day in many traditionally Catholic countries, such as Belgium and Costa Rica.

[375] Brian E. Daley, S. J., *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 205.

First, it is normally after three months, or the first trimester, that a human pregnancy starts to become visible. Second, according to 2 Sam 6:11, the Ark was placed in the care of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months, and Yhwh blessed his household during this time. This parallel suggests a typological connection between the Luke passage and the account of Yhwh's Ark in 2 Samuel 6. The possibility that Luke is alluding to the Ark Narrative here is further supported by the phrasing of Elizabeth's reaction when she sees Mary approaching. In Luke 1:43, Elizabeth blesses Mary and declares, "And how is it that this has happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Elizabeth's pronouncement appears to echo the question uttered by David in response to the outburst against Uzzah in 2 Sam 6:9, "How will the Ark of the Lord come to me?"[376]

In his commentary on 2 Sam 6:11, Rashi indicates that Obed-Edom's household was blessed by the Ark of Yhwh specifically with regard to fecundity: "*and the Lord blessed… all his household:* His wife and eight daughters-in-law gave birth to sextuplets as it is written: 'Peulthai the eighth (son), etc. Threescore and two were of Obed-Edom' (1 Chron 26:5)."[377] In support of this extraordinary birth rate, Rashi points to the large number of capable sons assigned to Obed-Edom in 1 Chronicles. Although the Chronicler does not claim that so many sets of sextuplets were born to Obed-Edom as a result of the sojourn of the Ark in his household, it does appear that the Chronicler may have in fact

[376] In his recent book, *Nuptial Symbolism in Second Temple Writings, the New Testament, and Rabbinic Literature: Divine Marriage at Key Moments of Salvation History* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), André Villeneuve affirms the plausibility of this typological relationship (255 n. 389). For an extended discussion of the parallels between Luke 1 and 2 Samuel 6, see Rene Laurentin, *The Truth of Christmas Beyond the Myths: The Gospels and the Infancy of Christ*, trans. Michael J. Wrenn et al. (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's, 1986), 56–58, 154–59.

[377] Avroham Yoseif Rosenberg, ed., *The Complete Jewish Bible, with Rashi Commentary*, online: http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/15866#showrashi=true.

already interpreted the Ark's blessing of Obed-Edom as one of copiously productive wombs.[378] In 1 Chronicles 26, we find a genealogy of the gatekeepers, including Obed-Edom, who is said to have sired eight sons, כי ברכו אלהים, "for God blessed him" (v. 5). The chapter goes on to state that numerous sons were also born to these sons. The firstborn of Obed-Edom, Shemaiah, for instance, is said to have had six sons of his own (v. 7). In sum, the Chronicler assigns to Obed-Edom sixty-two sons (v. 8).

It is understandable, then, that Rashi would make sense of this enormous quantity of offspring by matching the blessing in Chronicles with that of 2 Samuel 6, concluding that nine sets of sextuplets were born or conceived as a result of the blessing of Obed-Edom's household by the divine presence of the Ark. (Rashi's formulation presumes that the "sons" of Obed-Edom included his grandsons, and that he already had eight sons prior to the visit of the Ark. The blessing of Yhwh's Ark would have yielded another six sons plus forty-eight grandsons, for a grand total of sixty-two sons and grandsons.) If numerous children were conceived during this time, then the three-month period of the Ark's sojourn would be significant. After their first trimester, the pregnancies of the women in Obed-Edom's household would have just become visible, providing evidence of a divine blessing.

Several textual witnesses (4QSam^{a}, LXX^{L}, the OL and Josephus) include a notable plus in 2 Sam 6:12. After David has been told of Obed-Edom's blessing, the plus has him respond enthusiastically, indicating that he wishes for his own household to receive the same blessing by bringing the Ark there. So the LXX (ms 19/b`) reads: καὶ εἶπε Δαυίδ ἐπιστρέψω τὴν κιβωτὸν τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν εὐλογίαν εἰς τὸν οἶκόν μου, "And

[378] I would like to thank David Wright for first suggesting to me that the three-month stay of the Ark in 2 Sam 6:11 may be related to the human gestation period.

David said, 'Let me bring back the Ark of God and the blessing to my house.'"[379] If the blessing that David seeks is for his own wife to become pregnant, as did Obed-Edom's according to this tradition, then it is remarkable that this is precisely what David does *not* receive when the Ark comes to reside with him. Immediately upon the arrival of the Ark in Jerusalem, we are told specifically that David's wife Michal had no child until the day that she died (2 Sam 6:23). Thus, David is distinctly not blessed with respect to his offspring according to this account. If we apply to our reading of 2 Samuel 6 the idea that Obed-Edom was blessed with outstanding fecundity, then Michal's barrenness also takes on greater significance. If Yhwh withheld the blessing of the Ark from David in this tale, this could be taken to confirm Yhwh's reluctance to entrust his Ark to David's care, signaling friction between God and king.

In chapter 5, we explored the connection between the Ark and wombs in 1–2 Samuel. It seems this association developed and gained in prominence within the New Testament and Early Christian texts, where the womb of Mary is identified as the Ark of God. The Patristic Dormition homilies also provide compelling evidence that the concept of the Ark as a divine throne, which we discussed in chapters 1 and 2, remained an important theme in the religious imagination of the Common Era. Alongside her designation as Ark, the Virgin Mary is frequently described as the throne of God in these texts. The eighth-century bishop Saint Andrew of Crete, for example, says of Mary: "She

[379] Translation from the Greek is my own. A thorough discussion of the various Hebrew *Vorlagen* of these texts and the possible originality of the plus may be found in Robert Rezetko, *Source and Revision in the Narratives of David's Transfer of the Ark: Text, Language, and Story in 2 Samuel 6 and 1 Chronicles 13, 15–16*, LHBOTS 470 (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 175–76.

is the throne exalted on high, on which the Lord of Hosts is seated, in the vision of that most far-seeing of all the prophets, Isaiah (Is 6:1)."[380] In another homily, he declares:

> O, the wonder of it! She who supernaturally received the infinitely great God, to whom all limit is foreign, into the small space of her womb, today is borne on the small space of a bier, tended by human hands. She who enthroned in her bosom the one who rides on the backs of Cherubim, is laid in the bosom of a tomb carved from the rock."[381]

In chapter 1, we mentioned the continuing role of the ark as a container for the Torah in Jewish synagogues. Although the ark of the synagogue is not regarded as a divine throne, the chair of the revered prophet Elijah nevertheless remains an important piece of furniture in the Jewish tradition. The chair of Elijah is set up during circumcision ceremonies, with the idea that the prophet would thus be present to oversee the inscribing of the sign of God's covenant upon the boy. Elijah is also invited to attend the Passover seder, with an empty chair sometimes reserved for the prophet at the table. Many synagogues also keep a special chair for Elijah among the sanctuary furnishings.

A different chair plays a significant role in the religious ceremonies of the Hasidic Jewish group, Chabad-Lubavitch. Some members of this group regard their seventh rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (or, simply, "the Rebbe"), as the Messiah. Although the Rebbe died in 1994, many of his followers still maintain their belief that he is the Messiah. In certain Chabad ceremonies, the chair of the deceased Rebbe is celebrated and treated with great honor, since Schneerson is believed to be present there. Members of this group stand in line to touch the chair, and large crowds part respectfully

[380] Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 133.

[381] Ibid., 113.

in order to allow the Rebbe to proceed to his chair and take a seat.[382] The chairs of Elijah and the Rebbe recall the ancient Mesopotamian custom of the "ghost chair," which was regarded as a suitable resting place for the spirits of the deceased, as we discussed in chapter 2.

Metaphorically speaking, one piece of furniture is transformed into another when the deathbed of Mary (i.e., the living throne) becomes a subject of adoration in Patristic literature. In his second homily, Saint John of Damascus describes his experience of being overcome with passion for Mary's deathbed:

> Having come to this point in my discourse, I am—if I may express my inner feelings—on fire with hot and restless yearning, I am seized with a thrill of awe and bathed in joyous tears, imagining that I could embrace that blessed and beloved bed, so filled with wonders. This bed has received the tabernacle from which came life itself; by its very nearness it has come to have a share in her sanctity. And this holy temple—truly holy, truly worthy of God—I seemed for a moment to embrace in my own arms! I pressed my eyes, my lips, my forehead, my neck, my cheeks to her limbs, rejoicing in these sensations as if her body were present and I could touch it, even though I knew full well that I cannot see the one I long for with these eyes.[383]

John's intense attraction to the bed on which the Virgin died may seem outrageous to us, but his experience is consistent with a venerable tradition of temples and their furnishings as exuding erotic allure. In many ancient Near Eastern texts, temples are described as the bond between heaven and earth, the locus of intercourse between divine and human realms. As Mark S. Smith summarizes, "the god's erotic magnetism is conveyed through the literary presentation of the human experience at his temple-mountain … In short,

[382] I am indebted to Idan Dershowitz for calling this phenomenon to my attention. He also provided me with links to videos showing the Chabad ceremonies where the Lubavitch chair is honored in these ways. People lining up to touch the chair: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezxl_5E7X1w. A path being cleared for the procession of the Rebbe to his chair: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ydi4RzmIEWw.

[383] Ibid., 209.

attractiveness of deity and temple involves a reciprocal social power, perhaps even seduction."[384] Larry L. Lyke has argued that the Temple in Jerusalem was conceived as a womb or a female body already in ancient Israel: "the temple, subject to defilement brought on by Israel's 'adultery,' can be understood as a woman to whom God has the exclusively legitimate claim."[385]

In the Talmud, the Ark itself is imagined as an alluring female body. In *b. Yoma* 54a, for example, we find a solution to the somewhat confusing description of the Ark in the Temple in 1 Kgs 8:8:

> [A] R. Judah contrasted the following passages: "And the ends of the staves were seen" and it is written "but they could not be seen without" (1 Kgs 8:8)—how is that possible?—They could be observed, but not actually seen. Thus was it also taught: "And the ends of the staves were seen." One might have assumed that they did not protrude from their place. To teach us [the fact] Scripture says: "And the staves were so long." One might assume that they tore the curtain and showed forth; to teach us [the fact] Scripture says: "They could not be seen without." How then? They pressed forth and protruded as the two breasts of a woman, as it is said: "My beloved is unto me as a bag of myrrh, that lieth betwixt my breasts" (Song of Songs 1:13).[386]

Despite the allure of her deathbed, Mary herself is praised for being totally devoid of sexual desire. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception pronounces that Mary's

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[384] Mark S. Smith, "Like Deities, Like Temples (Like People)," in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day, LHBOTS 422 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 3–27, at 20.

[385] Larry L. Lyke, *I Will Espouse You Forever: The Song of Songs and the Theology of Love in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), xiii.

[386] The passage goes on to describe the cherubim that accompany the Ark in erotic terms: "[B] R. Kattina said: Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and the Cherubim were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwined with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman." Translation from *Yoma* (London: Soncino Press, 1974), as quoted in the article by Gary A. Anderson, "Towards a Theology of the Tabernacle and Its Furniture," in *Text, Thought, and Practice in Qumran and Early Christianity*, ed. Ruth Clements and Daniel R. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 161–94, at 175–76.

conception occurred in a special way, one that permitted her to be born free of original sin. It is for this reason that she remained pure and exempt from the normal human experience of lust. The Church Fathers envision Mary as being stalwart and immovable in her chastity, like a mountain: "You are Mount Sion, the fat mountain, full and solid as a cheese, where God dwells."[387]

This image of the Ark shares more in common with Athena, virgin goddess of wisdom, than the virile male warrior gods Yhwh, or Nergal/Erra. The Immaculate Conception of Mary may be compared to the wombless birth of Athena, who is said to have sprung forth from the head of Zeus. Both divine females were regarded as being free from libido due to the unusual circumstances of their birth. Perhaps in this transformation of the Ark from berserk warrior to a personality who is free of passion represents yet another attempt to "tame" the Ark.

The original Ark of the Covenant may have been looted or destroyed long ago, but the idea of the Ark is not lost to us. The holy Ark has continued to play a fruitful role in the imagination of Western culture, whether as virgin womb, royal throne, or dazzling archaeological treasure. As our study has demonstrated, the Ark of the Covenant is an immensely fecund image that expresses the persistent human longing for communion with the divine realm.

[387] Saint Andrew of Crete, referring to Ps 67:17; Ps 73 LXX (Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 142).

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