

RAANAN EICHLER

The Ark and the Cherubim

*Forschungen
zum Alten Testament*

Mohr Siebeck

Forschungen zum Alten Testament

Edited by

Konrad Schmid (Zürich) · Mark S. Smith (Princeton)
Hermann Spieckermann (Göttingen) · Andrew Teeter (Harvard)

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ISBN 978-3-16-155432-2 / eISBN 978-3-16-159264-5

DOI 10.1628/978-3-16-159264-5

ISSN 0940-4155 / eISSN 2568-8359 (Forschungen zum Alten Testament)

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available at <http://dnb.dnb.de>.

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The book was typeset by Martin Fischer in Tübingen using Minion typeface, printed on non-aging paper by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen, and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

Acknowledgements

Writing this book has made me realize how much help I need from others to create anything. Its core is a doctoral dissertation that I submitted to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2015. I was fortunate to have Baruch J. Schwartz as an adviser. He helped with countless matters great and small, provided unflagging, much-needed encouragement, and at the same time granted me the freedom to carry out the project in my own way.

One of Baruch's virtues as a mentor is that he urged me to seek input from other experts when relevant questions came up. The following people stood out by their patience in sharing their knowledge with me in their respective specialties: Emanuel Tov in textual criticism, Tallay Ornan in iconography, Arlette David in Egyptology, Chanan Ariel in the Hebrew language, and Hillel Gershuni in the Talmud and masorah. Idan Dershowitz, Shira Golani, and Liat Naeh read sections of the work at various stages and made helpful comments that were not limited to any one field.

Other scholars who helped along the way are Israel Knohl, Thomas Staubli, Daniel Schwartz, Yedidia Stern, Jan Joosten, Peter Machinist, Dalit Rom-Shiloni, Meira Polliack, Michael Segal, Shimon Gesundheit, Konrad Schmid, Michael Avioz, and Jonathan Jacobs. No doubt there are more who deserve to be mentioned. Institutions that gave their support include the Jean Nordmann Foundation, the University of Fribourg, the Mandel Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center in the Humanities and Jewish Studies, the Israel Democracy Institute, the Rothschild Foundation, Harvard University, Tel Aviv University, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, Bar-Ilan University, and the Beit Shalom Kyoto, Japan Foundation. The staff of Mohr Siebeck turned the work into a real book. And I can't forget the citizens of Israel, who managed to provide much of the funding and almost all of the security that made this and thousands of other scholarly projects possible, while meeting untold and unparalleled challenges with humanity and courage.

My father, David Eichler, and my brothers, Maor, Ari, and Noam Eichler, contributed their insights in many a fruitful discussion. The same is true of my mother and teacher, Aviva Weisel Eichler, of blessed memory. I wish she were still here. If this work shows any curiosity, intellectual honesty, brilliance, clarity of thought, or true modesty, it has some of her in it.

Throughout the process, I have had a partner: my beloved wife, Hayah Goldlist Eichler. Had she not shouldered most of the responsibility for our children (while also doing other things, such as writing several articles a day for a major newspaper or helping teach robots how to debate, not to mention creating the aforementioned children), I could not have completed this book by now, if ever. Above all, since we joined our lives fourteen years ago, her enlivening, animating presence has brought me, and, consequently, my work, the kind of invaluable and indefinable enrichment that I aspire at least partly to reciprocate and that the phrase “far more precious than coral” (Prov 31:10) is an attempt to express. This work is dedicated to her.

Jerusalem, Israel, 2021

Raanan Eichler

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Abbreviations

Bibliographic abbreviations in this book follow the lists in Patrick H. Alexander et al. (eds.), *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) and Billie J. Collins et al. (eds.), *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines* (2nd ed.; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014). Additionally, the following abbreviations are used:

- BkM Collection of the Brooklyn Museum. Online: www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollections/collections.
- BM Collection of the British Museum. Online: www.britishmuseum.org/research.
- CAL *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*. Online: cal.huc.edu.
- DJBA Sokoloff, Michael. *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods*. Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002.
- DJPA Sokoloff, Michael. *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*. Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1990.
- DULAT Olmo Lete, Gregorio del and Joaquín Sanmartín. *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*. Translated by Wilfred G. E. Watson. 2 vols. Boston: Brill, 2002.
- EHLL Khan, Geoffrey, ed. *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2013. Online: <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopedia-of-hebrew-language-and-linguistics>.
- EM Sukenik, Eleazar L. et al., eds. *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (אנציקלופדיה מקראית). 9 vols. Jerusalem: Bialik, 1950–1988. Hebrew.
- IMJ Collection of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Online: www.imj.org.il/imagery/collections/.
- MFA Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Online: www.mfa.org/collections.
- ML Collection of the Musée du Louvre. Online: www.louvre.fr/en/moteur-de-recherche-oeuvres.
- MMA Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Online: www.metmuseum.org/collection.
- OED *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press. Online: www.oed.com.
- OI Collection of the Oriental Institute, the University of Chicago. Online: <https://oi-idb.uchicago.edu>.
- OLD Glare, P. G. W., ed. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1982. Repr. 1983.
- PDAE Shaw, Ian and Paul Nicholson. *The Princeton Dictionary of Ancient Egypt*. Rev. ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008 (1995).
- SMB Collections of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Online: www.smb.museum.

General Introduction

A casual reading of the Hebrew Bible creates the impression that the most important objects in ancient Israel, those which constituted the focal point of all Israelite worship deemed proper by the biblical authors, were a certain wooden container whose basic name was *הָאָרוֹן*, conventionally styled in English “the ark” or “the ark of the covenant”, along with two statues of winged creatures, called *הַכְּרוּבִים*, “the cherubim”, which surmounted it. In some passages, this complex contains an additional element, *הַכַּפֹּרֶת*, often translated as “mercy seat”, which was situated atop the ark and from which the cherubim projected.

The present study is an attempt to understand these objects using the full gamut of data and tools available to the modern scholar. The central questions around which the study is structured are: (1) What were the form and function of each of these objects in the eyes of the biblical authors who described them? (2) How, if at all, do these forms and functions relate to those of objects known from the ancient Near East?¹

A relatively large amount of space in this study is devoted to the history of interpretation concerning the various questions raised. This feature is prompted by a belief that the formation and presentation of a clear picture of previous efforts toward the same goal constitute both a vital part of a rigorous research process and an important service provided to readers by the nonexperimental researcher.

Being so central to the world portrayed in the Hebrew Bible and to the traditions influenced by it, the ark and the cherubim have in fact received a great deal of attention in both premodern and modern biblical scholarship. Thus, the present study may be valuable not because too little has been said about these objects, but because so much of what has been said is open to question. New extrabiblical data are constantly becoming available, and many modern treatments of the objects under discussion fail to use even contemporarily available data, especially in the realms of iconography and Egyptology.

Thus, it will be argued, regarding the cherubim, that both their form and function have largely been misunderstood by modern scholars. Regarding the ark, it will be argued that a tendency to adduce invalid parallels to it has hindered a

¹ The term “Near East” is used here and throughout the study in a broad sense, as including Egypt, Cyprus, the Aegean region, and the Phoenician Mediterranean colonies, in addition to Southwest Asia.

complete, nuanced understanding of its form and function and in many cases has led to misunderstandings.

The study is evidence-oriented and designed for maximal logical independence from theories that do not enjoy solid consensus among experts. Thus, the consistent avoidance of, for example, the question of when the various components of the Pentateuch were created should not be interpreted as a rejection of any particular theory, but as an acknowledgment that there is much reasonable disagreement on this question and as the product of a desire to ensure that the study be relevant to as many readers as possible.

The structure of this study, some sections of which are developed from previous publications,² is straightforward. The first six chapters are devoted to the ark. The כַּפֹּרֶת, which appears in relatively few biblical passages, is dealt with in a single chapter, the seventh. The last five chapters are dedicated to the cherubim. A distillation of the main ideas is presented, with some further reflections, in a General Conclusion.

² § 3.4: Eichler, “Meaning of *zēr*”; § 3.5: idem, “Meaning of *pa’am*”; § 4.3: idem, “Poles of the Ark”; § 9.3: idem, “Meaning of הַכְּרֻבִים”; § 9.4: idem, “When God Abandoned”; § 10.2: idem, “Cherub”; § 12: idem, “Function of the Ark Cherubim”.

1. The Ark: Introduction

The common noun אָרוֹן or אֲרוֹן is attested 202 times in the Hebrew Bible.¹ In one instance, it denotes a receptacle for the mummified corpse of Joseph in Egypt (Gen 50:26). In six others, it designates a receptacle placed in the compound of the Jerusalem temple for collecting public contributions of silver (2 Kgs 12:10, 11 ≈ 2 Chr 24:8, 10, 11_{i-ii}). In its remaining 195 attestations, the word appears always to refer to a revered object closely associated with the God of Israel. In these occurrences, the word is conventionally rendered in English as “ark”.

1.1 Uniqueness

As seems to have been understood by nearly all interpreters of the relevant texts,² the biblical writers who used the word in these 195 occurrences intended thereby to denote a single, well-known object. In other words, these writers knew of, and expected their readers to know of, only one sacred ark. This is evidenced by three facts: First, in almost all of these occurrences, the word is, or is potentially, in the determinate state, either having an affixed definite article (הָאָרוֹן), or forming part of a construct chain that ends either in a proper noun (e. g., אָרוֹן הַ') or in a common noun to which the definite article is affixed (e. g., אָרוֹן הַקְּבִירִית). The sole exceptions (Exod 25:10; Deut 10:1, 3) are found within what we may refer to as origin stories (Exod 25:10–22 ≈ 37:1–9 + 40:20–21; Deut 10:1–9) and designate an object that is only contemplated or was just recently manufactured and thus would not yet have attained any renown. Second, the word occasionally has a definite article affixed to it (הָאָרוֹן) even upon its first appearance in the given context (Lev 16:2; Num 3:31; 2 Sam 11:11; 1 Chr 6:16; arguably Num 10:35). Third, no biblical passage speaks of or implies the existence of more than one sacred ark.

¹ Even-Shoshan, in its entry on the word, enumerates only 201 occurrences, because the second and third occurrences in 1 Sam 5:8 are erroneously counted as one. The entry also fails to note that there are two separate occurrences in 1 Sam 14:18, but it proceeds with the numbering correctly.

² E. g., the rabbis in *y. Sheqalim* 6:1 ≈ *y. Sotah* 8:3 ≈ *Yalqut Shim'on* 1:367 (Terumah) ≈ *ibid.* 2:101 (1 Samuel); Abraham ibn Ezra, commentary on Deut 10:1, in Cohen, *Deuteronomy*, 63, 65; Isaac Abrabanel, commentary on Num 10:31, in Shaviv, *Numbers*, 69–76; Tur-Sinai, “Ark (Ark of God)”, 538, 547; Grintz, “Ark of the Covenant”, 460; Zobel, “*אֲרוֹן*”, 364–365; Seow, “Ark of the Covenant”, 386.

To be sure, there is an alternative opinion, according to which the biblical authors knew and spoke of more than one ark. The earliest form of this view, found in the Talmud and attributed variously to R. Judah b. Lakish or R. Judah b. Ilai (both of whom were Tannaim of the second century CE), is that there were two separate arks, one of which was brought into battles and is referred to in Num 10:33, the other of which was kept in the sanctuary and is referred to in Num 14:44.³ The implausibility of R. Judah's view is underscored by the fact that both of the cited passages use exactly the same name for the object to which they refer: אָרוֹן בְּרִית ה'.

In the early twentieth century, Arnold, consciously building on R. Judah's view, claimed that there were many arks, each associated with one of the various sanctuaries that possessed a consecrated priesthood, and that the early biblical authors knew of them, the notion of a single ark being a "Deuteronomistic conceit".⁴ Two decades later, Arnold's view was repeated in a major journal of Semitics, accompanied by the statement: "[t]hat there was more than one ark is now quite generally accepted".⁵ A plurality of sacred arks, at least in historical fact if not in the awareness of the biblical authors, has been assumed or considered by some scholars in more recent years as well.⁶

Arnold's central argument was his assertion that the twice-occurring construct phrase אָרוֹן אֱלֹהִים (1 Sam 3:3; 4:11) is indeterminate, "the genitive אֱלֹהִים being employed generically and adjectivally", and that it therefore indicates an acquaintance with a plurality of sacred arks; just as, for example, אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים (e. g., 1 Kgs 13:1) is indeterminate and indicates a familiarity with many such personages. This argument is incorrect. Syntactically, while the phrase אָרוֹן אֱלֹהִים *can* be construed as indeterminate ("an ark of God"), it can also be determinate ("the ark of God"), since אֱלֹהִים is most often a proper noun (e. g., Gen 1:1; 3:3; 20:3). As noted by Kaufmann, in one of the two occurrences of the phrase (1 Sam 4:11), it is obvious that אָרוֹן אֱלֹהִים is in fact determinate, because it refers to a specific object mentioned several times immediately beforehand (vv. 3, 4_{i-ii}, 5, 6). It is thus clear that in this pericope (1 Sam 4), אָרוֹן אֱלֹהִים is interchangeable with the indisputably determinate phrases אָרוֹן בְּרִית ה' אֱלֹהִים (v. 4) and אָרוֹן ה' אֱלֹהִים (vv. 13,

³ See the talmudic sources in the previous note, as well as t. Sotah 7:18; Baraita de Meleket Hamishkan 6:18–25 ≈ Leqah Tov on Exod 37:1 ≈ Midrash Agadah (Buber) on Exod 35:30; Sifre Zuta and Leqah Tov on Num 10:33. R. Judah's opinion was endorsed by Rashi and Hezekiah b. Manoah for reasons unrelated to the considerations in the Talmud; see Rashi's comments on Num 10:33, in Cohen, *Numbers*, 60, and on Deut 10:1, in Cohen, *Deuteronomy*, 62; Hezekiah's commentary on Num 2:17, in Katzenelnbogen, *Numbers*, 12. Nahmanides took a middle ground, maintaining that all biblical references to the ark except for those in Deut 10:1–5 referred to a single sacred object; see commentary on Deut 10:1, 5, in Cohen, *Numbers*, 63, 65.

⁴ Arnold, *Ephod*, 24–122.

⁵ May, "Ark", 219. See also Morgenstern, *Ark*, 112–131. For additional scholars who held this view, see Schmitt, *Zelt*, 168–173 and notes.

⁶ Van der Toorn and Houtman, "David and the Ark", 229–231; Levin, "Was the Ark"; Garfinkel, Ganor, and Hasel, *Footsteps*, 162; Metzler, "Ark", 35–36, 43–44.

17, 18, 19, 21, 22).⁷ Moreover, there exist additional construct phrases with אֱלֹהִים as the modifying noun that are certainly determinate: not only the Chronicler's אֱלֹהִים בַּיִת אֱלֹהִים (2 Chr 34:9), which clearly refers to the one, well-known temple in Jerusalem, and which is interchangeable with בַּיִת הָאֱלֹהִים (35:8);⁸ but also אֱלֹהִים גֵּן (Ezek 28:13, in apposition to the proper noun עֵדֶן; 31:8_{i-ii}), which clearly refers to the one, well-known garden of God, and which is interchangeable with הָאֱלֹהִים גֵּן (31:7); as well as אֱלֹהִים עֵיר (Ps 46:5), which is interchangeable with הָאֱלֹהִים עֵיר (Ps 87:3). Thus, the notion that the biblical authors referred to more than one sacred ark must be rejected.

1.2 Contexts

All but two of the biblical references to the ark – that is, 193 references – are found within the two major historiographical sections of the Hebrew Bible: the Pentateuch and Former Prophets (the “Primary History”), and Chronicles.

1.2.1 Pentateuch and Former Prophets

Of these, 145 references are found in the Pentateuch and Former Prophets, mostly in Samuel (61), Joshua (30), and Exodus (26), but also in Kings (12), Deuteronomy (8), Numbers (6), Leviticus (1), and Judges (1). A naïve reading of the references to the ark in this section of the Bible yields an overall chronology of the object that is remarkably coherent, though neither continuous nor entirely free of inconsistencies. The ark is made in the wilderness and secreted in the tabernacle (Exod 25–40; Lev 16:2). When on the move, it is carried by Levites (Num 3–7; Deut 10, 31). It travels ahead of the people on the journey from the mountain of YHWH (Num 10:33), although it remains in the camp during the battle of Hormah (Num 14:44).

Under the tenure of Joshua, the ark leads the people during the crossing of the Jordan (Josh 3–4) and at the conquests of Jericho and Ai (Josh 6–7), and it is present again at the ceremony on Mount Ebal (Josh 8). During the affair of the concubine at Gibeah, it is located at Bethel under the ministrations of Phineas ben Eleazar (Judg 20:27). Later, we find the ark in Shiloh under the care of Eli (1 Sam 3:3). From there it is taken to the battle of Aphek, where it is captured by the Philistines and brought to the towns of Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron in turn;

⁷ Kaufmann, *Toledot*, 2:349 n. 1. Because this instance of אֱלֹהִים אֲרוֹן directly contradicts his interpretation of the phrase, Arnold was forced to conjecture that it is a secondary scribal emendation of an original אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים, supposedly made in order to avoid “the vocal sequence האֱלֹהִים הָאֲרוֹן” (p. 36 n. 1). This concession leaves his entire argument for an indeterminate אֲרוֹן resting on a single instance (1 Sam 3:3), a fact that he seems to have taken pains to obscure.

⁸ Arnold dismissed this instance as a peculiarity of the Chronicler's style (p. 31).

after seven months, the Philistines return it to Beth-Shemesh, whence it is transferred onward to Kiriath Yearim and placed under the care of Abinadab and his son Eleazar (1 Sam 4–7). During the reign of Saul, it shows up at the battle of Michmas (1 Sam 14:18_{i-ii}).

King David brings the ark from Kiriath Yearim to Jerusalem with great public fanfare, but he detains it for three months at the estate of Obed Edom before depositing it in a dedicated tent in the city of David. There it remains, despite David's earnest desire to provide a permanent structure in which to house it (2 Sam 6–7). It is later said to be present at the siege of Rabbah (2 Sam 11:11). It is brought out of Jerusalem briefly during David's flight from Absalom but is returned by Zadok and Abiathar (2 Sam 15), the latter of whom is later recalled to have been a porter of the ark (1 Kgs 2:26). It is still in Jerusalem during the reign of Solomon (1 Kgs 3:15), who builds a temple to house it (1 Kgs 6:19) and finally deposits it there in an elaborate public ceremony (1 Kgs 6–8).

1.2.2 *Chronicles and Other Books*

The picture presented in Chronicles (48 references) is also quite coherent and overlaps almost entirely with the one that arises from the Pentateuch and Former Prophets. David facilitates the provision of a permanent resting place for the ark (1 Chr 6:16). He brings it from Kiriath Yearim to Jerusalem but detains it at the estate of Obed Edom (1 Chr 13) before bringing it to a dedicated tent (1 Chr 15–17). David instructs the leaders to help Solomon bring the ark to the temple (1 Chr 22:19) and makes the necessary preparations for the task (1 Chr 28). After remaining in Jerusalem for some time (2 Chr 1:4; 8:11), the ark is indeed brought to the temple in a public ceremony (2 Chr 5–6). Centuries later, Josiah tells the Levites that the deposition of the ark in the temple should free them to perform other duties (2 Chr 35:3).

There remain only two explicit references to the ark in the Hebrew Bible. The first is a recollection by an anonymous psalmist of the efforts of David to find a permanent place for it (Ps 132:8). The second is a Jeremian prediction that in the future the ark's importance will give way to that of Jerusalem as a whole (Jer 3:16). There may be additional allusions to the ark, which scholars have tended to see especially in Psalms.⁹

1.2.3 *The Versions*

The nonmasoretic textual witnesses present several variations from this set of references to the ark. In the pilgrimage commandments of the "Covenant Code"

⁹ Davies, "Ark in the Psalms"; Seow, "Ark of the Covenant", 388; Day, "Ark and the Cherubim".

(Exod 23:17) and the law code of Exodus 34 (v. 23), the destination of the pilgrimage is specified in the Samaritan Pentateuch – supported, naturally, by the Samaritan Targum – as פני הארון ה', "the face of the ark of YHWH", in place of the reading פני ה'אֵדוֹן ה', "the face of the Lord YHWH", attested in the Masoretic Text and supported by all the other textual witnesses.

A passage at the end of Joshua that appears only in the Septuagint states that after the death of Phineas, the Israelites took the responsibility for the ark upon themselves (Josh 24:33^a). The relevant segment reads ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ λαβόντες οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ τὴν κιβωτὸν [τῆς διαθήκης] τοῦ θεοῦ περιεφέρουσιν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς, which has been retroverted as follows: ביום ההוא לקחו בני ישראל את* בימים ההם ויסבו בתוכם ארון [ברית] האלהים ויסבו בתוכם*¹⁰ This reading, or one similar to it, is reflected in Damascus Document 5:2–5.¹¹ The Septuagint also contains a few additional references to the ark within the accounts of the tabernacle's construction (Exod 38:5, 11: הארון*) and of the ark's wanderings in Philistia (1 Sam 5:11_{ii}: ארון אלהי* ישראל; 6:20: ארון ה'*).¹²

Conversely, in the Septuagint the ark is absent from the battle of Michmas: both masoretic references to it there (1 Sam 14:18_{i-ii}) are represented in this work as τὸ εφουδ = האפוד*, "the ephod". Several manuscripts and editions of the rabbinic work Baraita de Meleket Hamishkan support this reading with האפוד, while another manuscript conflates האפוד with ארון האלהים.¹² Additionally, several of many masoretic references to the ark in the accounts of the tabernacle's construction (Exod 37:5_{i-ii}; 40:20_{iii}), the conquest of Jericho (Josh 6:4, 6_{i-ii}), and the bringing of the ark to the temple (1 Kgs 8:4) are absent from the Septuagint, because the textual segments in which they appear are not represented therein. In four further instances in Joshua, the phrase לפני ארון ה', "in front of the ark of YHWH", in the Masoretic Text appears in the Septuagint as לפני ה', "in front of YHWH" (Josh 4:5; 6:7, 13; 7:6). Finally, in one of the many references to the ark in Chronicles' account of the deposition of the ark in the temple, ויראו ראשי הַבָּדִים מִן הָאָרוֹן, "the ends of the poles were visible from the ark" (2 Chr 5:9), several masoretic manuscripts and the Septuagint attest the text ויראו ראשי הַבָּדִים מִן הַקֹּדֶשׁ,¹³ "the ends of the poles were visible from the holy place", which is also the

¹⁰ Rofé, "End", 19, 21; Tov, *Textual Criticism*, 298. Rofé conjectures (pp. 26–28) that the text originally read אל בית אנשי instead of בני ישראל, and he associates it with Judg 20:27, which places the ark in Bethel. Shelly (*Hebrew Translation*, 20) retroverts אותו אליהם instead of בתוכם.

¹¹ For more on references to the ark in nonbiblical texts from the Judean Desert, see Porzig, "Ark", passim ≈ idem, *Lade*, 256–277.

¹² Kirschner, *Baraita*, 179 apparatus; similarly, Abraham ibn Ezra in his short commentary on Exod 28:6, in Cohen, *Exodus II*, 97. These Hebrew readings, which are not mentioned in *BHS*, are noted by Segal (*Books of Samuel*, 107). The Septuagintal reading corresponds to v. 3 according to all witnesses and is generally held as original. However, some scholars favor the masoretic reading: Arnold, *Ephod*, 12–17; Davies, "Ark or Ephod"; Bartal, "For the Ark"; Ahlström, "Travels", 145; van der Toorn and Houtman, "David and the Ark", 210–219; Levin, "Was the Ark".

¹³ The segment is not represented at all in the Peshitta, the Vulgate, and Targum of Chronicles.

masoretic reading in the parallel verse in Kings (1 Kgs 8:8). The primary masoretic reading in Chronicles is evidently erroneous.

1.2.4 Absences

The ark is entirely absent from biblical wisdom literature, which is to be expected given that this corpus exhibits a general lack of concern with Israelite cultic matters. Moreover, with one or two exceptions (Jer 3:16; 2 Chr 35:3), the ark is not mentioned in prophetic literature or in any passage that is set after the time of Solomon. This has prompted some scholars to posit that the ark was historically no longer in existence throughout much of the monarchic period.¹⁴ But this conjecture has no positive evidence to support it, and it has difficulty contending with the noted exceptions. A simpler explanation emerges from the fact that the biblical writers' interest in the ark is confined almost exclusively to its manufacture, its movements, its location, and the identity of its caretakers. Once the ark is brought to the temple, which is seen by all texts that refer to it as the ark's permanent resting place, the biblical writers have little cause to mention it. Why this is so will be discussed further below (§ 6.4).

1.3 Status

It may be said at the outset that the ark is consistently portrayed in the biblical texts as the most important cultic object in ancient Israel. This preeminence is expressed in several ways.

1.3.1 Origin

The ark's two origin stories agree in granting it essentially the same venerable pedigree, stating that it was created under the auspices of Moses during the wilderness period at the command of YHWH himself at the mountain of revelation. In the priestly account, Moses is charged at Mount Sinai (Exod 24:16) with the crafting of all the ark's parts and appurtenances (אֲרֹן מִשְׁכָּנוֹ, etc.: 25:11–21) as well as its final positioning (40:3).¹⁵ But the actual execution of the ark, with all its parts

¹⁴ E. g., Haran, "Disappearance", 46–58. For a recent, detailed discussion of the ultimate fate of the ark, with extensive bibliography, see Day, "Whatever Happened". (Another perspective is presented in Metzler, "Ark", 8–37.) For analysis of post-biblical traditions concerning this fate, see Milikowsky, "Where is the Lost Ark"; Fisher, "Memories", 150–165.

¹⁵ The instruction for making the ark itself (Exod 25:10) involves textual disunity. The operative word in the Masoretic Text is אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ, which may mean "they shall make" and refer to the Israelites, who are mentioned beforehand by name in v. 2 and alluded to in v. 9 (thus Nahmanides on v. 10, in Cohen, *Exodus II*, 71). More likely, it means "there shall be made" and refers to no one in particular, the subject being indefinite (see GKC, § 144f; Joüon, § 155b). The masoretic

and appurtenances, is credited to Bezalel (שָׁעִיר: 37:1–8), in accordance with the general statement that he and his assistant Oholiab made everything concerning which Moses was commanded (שָׁעִיר, שָׁעִיר: 31:6–11); only the final assembly and positioning of the ark is attributed directly to Moses (40:20–21).

In the Deuteronomic account, Moses simply states that he was instructed by YHWH at “the Mountain” (Deut 10:1) – presumably Horeb (9:8) – to make the ark (אֲרֹן מִשְׁכַּן עֲשֵׂה: 10:1), and that he did so (שָׁעִיר: v. 3; עָשִׂיתִי: v. 5). A passage in Kings also presupposes that the ark was in existence at the time of Moses (1 Kgs 8:9; cf. 2 Chr 5:10).

1.3.2 Formal Position

In the priestly tabernacle account, the ark is always mentioned first among the tabernacle objects (though occasionally after some structural elements of the tabernacle itself). This primacy is found in the commands for constructing the elements of the tabernacle (Exod 25:10–22) and the account of their fulfillment (37:1–9); in the commands for assembling the tabernacle (40:3) and the account of their fulfillment (40:20–21); and in the commands for disassembling the tabernacle (Num 4:5–6). It is also observed in brief lists: the list of objects to be anointed with the holy oil (Exod 30:26); the list of items to be prepared by Bezalel and Oholiab (31:7); the list of items to be prepared by the skilled Israelites (35:12); the list of items completed and brought to Moses (39:35); and the list of items under the care of the Qohathites (Num 3:31).

Another indication of the primacy of the ark is that people and objects often have their position defined by the statement that they are located “in front of” (לְפָנָיו) it. This occurs once in the priestly tabernacle account (Exod 40:5) but mostly outside of it: in Joshua (4:5; 6:4, 6, 7, 13; 7:6),¹⁶ Samuel (1 Sam 5:3, 4; 2 Sam 6:4), Kings (1 Kgs 3:15; 8:5), and Chronicles (1 Chr 15:24; 16:4, 6, 37_{i–ii}; 2 Chr 5:6).

1.3.3 Physical Position

The ark is described as being placed at the focal point of the Israelite cult. In the priestly tabernacle account, this spot is the “holy of holies”, the inner cella of the tabernacle, behind the curtain that screens off this space (Exod 26:33–34; 40:3 = 21; Lev 16:2). Correspondingly, in Kings, the ark is said to be situated in the אֲרֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ, the inner cella of the temple (1 Kgs 6:19; 8:6 = 2 Chr 5:7).

reading is supported by the Peshitta, the targumim, and Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 3.134). However, the Vulgate has the plural imperative “make”, reflecting the variant vocalization אֲרֹנֵי* and certainly referring to the Israelites. The Samaritan Pentateuch has וַעֲשֵׂה, “you shall make”, referring to Moses; this reading is supported by the Septuagint.

¹⁶ All six occurrences of the phrase in Joshua are absent in the Septuagint, which instead reflects either אֲרֹן לְפָנָיו or nothing at all (see § 1.2.3).

Moreover, several passages indicate that the very purpose of the temple was to house the ark. The original proposal to build a temple is phrased, in the mouth of David, as follows: “Now look, I am living in a cedar palace, while the ark of God lives in a tent” (2 Sam 7:2 ≈ 1 Chr 17:1). The temple, then, is “a cedar palace” for the ark. Later, in the account of the temple’s construction, we read that the temple’s inner cella was built “so that the ark of YHWH’s covenant could be placed there” (1 Kgs 6:19). Accordingly, the construction of the temple was consummated when the ark was brought into the cella (1 Kgs 8:6–11 ≈ 2 Chr 5:7–14). This idea is further alluded to when speaking of the “resting place” of YHWH and his ark, evidently the temple (Ps 132:8 ≈ 2 Chr 6:41).

When on the move, the ark also occupies a preeminent position, though there is disagreement as to whether this position is at the center or the front of the people – the heart or the head, as it were. In the priestly tabernacle account, it is implied that the ark always travels at the center of the people (Num 2:17; 10:21), and this positioning seems to be mirrored, in a strictly military context, in the narrative of the conquest of Jericho (Josh 6:8–9, 13). But according to other accounts, the ark traveled ahead of the people on the journey from the mountain of YHWH (Num 10:33) and when crossing the Jordan (Josh 3:3–4, 6, 11, 14; 4:11).¹⁷

1.3.4 Restrictedness

In accordance with its lofty status, the ark has designated custodians, namely the Levites. This is a detail that many passages make a point of emphasizing, usually expressing the custodianship via the verb נָשָׂא, “carry”. In the priestly tabernacle account, the ark, along with the other major tabernacle objects – the table, the lampstand, the bronze altar, the incense altar, their ancillary objects, and the tabernacle’s entrance screen – is under the care specifically of בְּנֵי קָהָת, “the Qohathites” (Num 3:29–31), who constitute the branch of בְּנֵי לֵוִי, “the Levites” (v. 15), to which Moses and Aaron belong (Num 26:58–59; Exod 6:18, 20). In other sources, the designated handlers of the ark are identified with similar labels: שִׁבְטַת הַלֵּוִי, “the tribe of Levi” (Deut 10:8); הַלֵּוִיִּם, “the Levites” (Deut 31:25; 1 Sam 6:15; 2 Sam 15:24; 1 Chr 15:2, 26, 27; 2 Chr 5:4); בְּנֵי הַלֵּוִיִּם, “the sons of the Levites” (1 Chr 15:15); הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי לֵוִי, “the Levitical priests” (Deut 31:9); and הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלֵּוִיִּם, “the Levite priests” (Josh 3:3; 8:33). Occasionally, the handlers of the ark are called simply הַכֹּהֲנִים, “the priests” (Josh 3:6, 8, 13–15, 17; 4:9–10, 16, 18; 6:6, 12;

¹⁷ Rashi (comment on Num 10:33, in Cohen, *Numbers*, 60; cf. comment on Josh 3:3, in Cohen, *Joshua*, 10) and Hezekiah b. Manoah (on Num 2:17, in Katzenelnbogen, *Numbers*, 12) deployed the “two arks” hypothesis (see § 1.1 and esp. n. 3) to resolve the contradiction; whereas Abraham ibn Ezra (on Num 10:31, in Cohen, *Numbers*, 61), Gersonides (on Num 10:33, *ibid.*), Abrabanel (on Num 10:33–36, in Shaviv, *Numbers*, 74–76), and Obadiah Sforno (on Num 10:33, in Katzenelnbogen, *Numbers*, 80) addressed it by maintaining that the ark usually traveled at the center of the host but that there were exceptions to this rule.

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