

# The Egyptian Origin of the Ark of the Covenant

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Scott B. Noegel

## Abstract

The best non-Israelite parallel to the Ark of the Covenant comes not from Mesopotamia or Arabia, but from Egypt. The sacred bark was a ritual object deeply embedded in the Egyptian ritual and mythological landscapes. It was carried aloft in processions or pulled in a sledge or a wagon; its purpose was to transport a god or a mummy and sometimes to dispense oracles. The Israelite conception of the Ark probably originated under Egyptian influence in the Late Bronze Age.

The Ark of the Covenant holds a prominent place in the biblical narratives surrounding the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. Its central role as a vehicle for communicating with Yahweh and as a portable priestly reliquary distinguishes it from all other aspects of the early cult. In varying detail, biblical texts ascribe to the Ark a number of functions and powers, which have led scholars to see the Bible's portrayal of the Ark as the result of historical development and theological reinterpretation.<sup>1</sup> While some have looked to Mesopotamia and premodern Bedouin societies for parallels to the Ark, the parallels have remained unconvincing and have contributed to the general view that the Ark was uniquely Israelite. Today I propose that we can gain greater

insight into the Israelite Ark and the narratives in which it appears by looking to a hitherto overlooked parallel: the Egyptian sacred bark.

## Ark of the Covenant

Biblical texts describe the Ark of the Covenant as a sacred object containing five major features. The first is a wooden box (Heb. *'arōn*), roughly 4 ft. × 2.5 × 2.5, and overlaid with gold.<sup>2</sup> The second is a lid (Heb. *kappōreth*), made entirely of gold, not plated like the box,<sup>3</sup> which contains a molding running along its top edge. Its third component is a pair of gold *kerubîm*, i.e.,

<sup>1</sup> See Dietrich (2007: 250–252).

S.B. Noegel (✉)  
Near Eastern Languages and Civilization (NELC),  
University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA  
e-mail: snoegel@uw.edu

<sup>2</sup> The word *šittîm* “acacia” is a loan from Egyptian. See Muchiki (1999: 256). There are a number of species of acacia that grow in Egypt, the Sinai peninsula, the Judean desert, and the Negev.

<sup>3</sup> The lid also is translated “mercy seat,” based on an etymological association. However, the word *kappōreth* simply means “covering.”

“sphinxes,”<sup>4</sup> that rest on top of the lid and face each other with their wings touching. Note that the lid was understood as God’s “throne,” whereas the box was viewed as his “footstool” (e.g., 1 Chron 28:2, 2 Chron 9:18, Ps 99:5, 132:7). The Ark’s fourth feature was its wooden poles, which were inserted through four gold rings and never removed.<sup>5</sup> Only the priestly tribe of Levi was permitted to carry the Ark, and even then, only after they had veiled it (Exod 40:3, 40:21).<sup>6</sup> No one of non-priestly descent was allowed to touch it. The Ark’s fifth feature was its contents: the tablets of the law (Deut 10:1–5, *ʾarōn hab-berîth*; Exod 25:22, *ʾarōn ha-edūth*), a jar of manna (Exod 16:33–34), and possibly the rod of Aaron (Heb 9:4, cf. Num 17:10).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>On the Egyptian origin of this creature, see already Albright (1938) and now Mettinger (1999). Attestations of the Assyrian cognate *ḫuribu* do not permit a precise or a consistent description of the creature. Thus, some appear to have animal heads while others have human heads. Nevertheless, the *ḫuribu* commonly are described as fashioned images that either stand at entrances to portals or face each other. The use of the cuneiform DINGIR sign marks them as divine. See CAD K, 559, s. v. *kuribu*. Even in the Bible, there is some variation concerning this creature. Thus, the *kerubîm* on the Ark have two wings (Exod 25:20, 37:9), but four wings in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezek 1:6). The closest parallels are the sarcophagus of Ahiiram, king of Byblos, and an ivory found at Megiddo. Both objects are highly Egyptianized and depict a king seated on a *kerubîm*-flanked throne. The latter item also features a winged solar disk and lotus offering. See Kyrieleis (1969: 41–81). Many objects found at Megiddo dating to this period evince Egyptian influence, if not also a presence. See Novacek (2011). On other possible parallels, including a stone throne from Lebanon and a divine statue from Cyprus, see Zwickel (1999: 101–105). On archaeological evidence for the Israelite cult, see Zwickel (1994).

<sup>5</sup>On two occasions oxen pulled the Ark on a “newly constructed wagon” (1 Sam 6:7, 2 Sam 6:3), though this was not ordinary practice.

<sup>6</sup>Moreover, the priests were forbidden from looking at the *kappôreth* “lid.” Hence, it was veiled. Only the high priest could look at the *kappôreth* on Yom Kippur, provided he has undertaken a special rite and has changed his garments (Lev 16:4). On the veil and the lid, see Bordreuil (2006).

<sup>7</sup>According to Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.219, the innermost sanctum was empty.

In addition to serving as a reliquary, texts attribute two other functions to the Ark. Most prominently, it served as the symbolic presence of Yahweh. In times of war, Yahweh led as the Lord of Hosts, seated upon the *kerubîm*, surrounded by standard bearers preceding him. Each standard was topped with a banner representing an Israelite tribe or family line (Num 2:1–34, 10:35, Ps 132:8).<sup>8</sup>

As the symbolic presence of Yahweh, the Ark was connected to miracles and oracles. Thus, when the priests carried the Ark into the Jordan River the waters parted (Josh 3:8–17), and Moses, Phinehas, Samuel, Saul,<sup>9</sup> and David each received divine direction from the Ark (Exod 25:22, 30:6, Num 7:89, Judg 20:27–28, 1 Sam 3:3, 1 Sam 14:18, cf. 2 Sam 2:1, 5:19, 11:11, 15:24).<sup>10</sup>

Before the temple was built, the Ark stayed at a number of sanctuaries including Gilgal (Josh 7:6), Shechem (Josh 8:33), Bokhim (Judg 2:1–5), Bethel (Judg 20:27), Shiloh (1 Sam 3:3), Kiriath-Jearim (1 Sam 7:1–2), and Gibeon (1 Kgs 3:4, 1 Chron 16:37–42, 21:29, 2 Chron 1:3–4). During the visits Yahweh would accept sacrifices and bless his sanctuaries. Finally, the Ark acquired a ritual function. On Yom Kippur the high priest would sprinkle bull’s blood onto and in front of the Ark’s lid (Lev 16:14).

<sup>8</sup>In Exod 17:15, Moses built an altar to Yahweh after his battle against the Amalekites and named it יְהוָה נִסִּי “Yahweh is my banner.” The identification of Yahweh with a banner is reminiscent of the Egyptian hieroglyphic representation of *ntr* “god” with a banner (i.e., ꜥꜣ).

<sup>9</sup>1 Chron 13:3 suggests that people did not seek oracles from the Ark during Saul’s reign.

<sup>10</sup>The LXX of 1 Sam 14:18 reads “ephod.” The instrument of divination in 2 Samuel is less clear, but Van der Toorn and Houtman (1994) argue that “ephod” here stands for “Ark” and that the Ark functioned for divination. They also opine that there were multiple Arks in the region whose existence was blurred by later Deuteronomist editing. If the authors are correct in arguing that the Ark that David brought to Jerusalem was not a national symbol, but a Saulide cult object, then perhaps we should look to the tribe of Benjamin as the original locus for the object.

**Fig. 17.1** Divine palanquins, relief of Tiglath Pileser III



### Previously Proposed Parallels to the Ark

Scholars have cited two objects as possible parallels for the Ark. The first is a divine palanquin as seen notably in the Assyrian reliefs of Tiglath Pileser III (744–727 B.C.E.).<sup>11</sup> The panel shows the king's seizure of foreign gods from their temples (Fig. 17.1).<sup>12</sup>

While some of the gods sit on thrones and might have served as a source of oracles, a number of differences remain. No poles were used to transport them, and there are no boxes and no lids. They were not covered in gold, nor do any of them contain relics or *kerubîm*. There is no evidence that the statues were carried into battle. Finally, there appear to have been no restrictions on who could touch them.

A second object previously compared to the Ark is the Bedouin *ʿutfa* (also called a *maḥmal*, *abu-dhur*, *markab*, and *qubba* [Fig. 17.2]).<sup>13</sup>

It accompanied tribes into battle and signalled the presence of the divine. However, the Bedouin transported them on horses or camels. It contained no box, no lid, and no poles. Some were inscribed with spells and Quranic verses, but they never served as reliquaries or as the throne and footstool of God. They were not overlaid in gold, and they contained no *kerubîm*. There also were no restrictions on who could touch them.

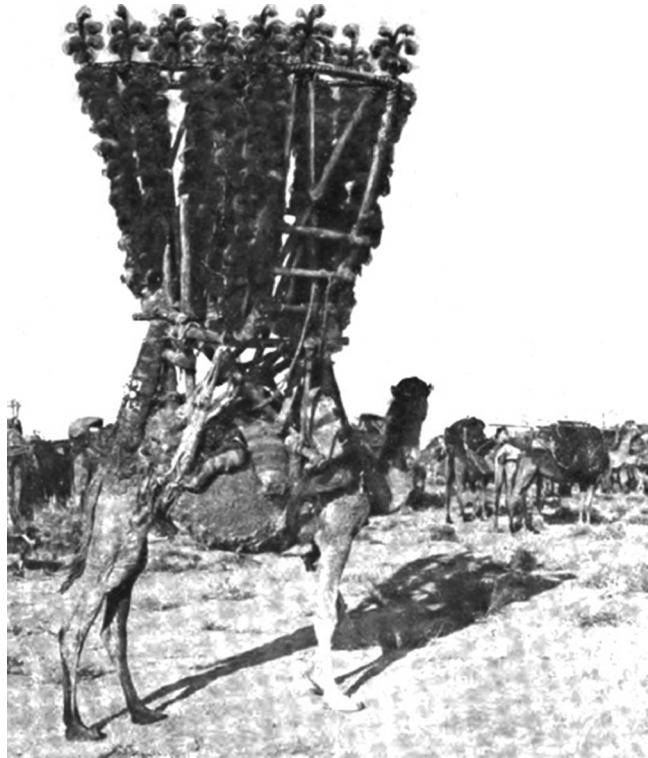
While the palanquin and Bedouin objects offer some parallels, the dissimilarities limit their usefulness as analogues. Indeed, Menahem Haran long ago observed that the Ark's origins must be sought not in nomadic life, but in a

<sup>11</sup> Zwickel (1999: 106) also suggests a parallel with Egyptian divine palanquins, but he appears to reject it, because the Bible refers to the *ʾarōn* as a footstool. He does not consider a connection to the barks. See also Zwickel (1994).

<sup>12</sup> The relief, which is on display in the British Museum, was photographed by the author.

<sup>13</sup> The image of the *ʿutfa* appears in Musil (1928: 573). The *ʿutfa*, *maḥmal*, *abu-dhūr*, *markab*, and *qubba* have been treated rather loosely as a collective by earlier biblicalists who proposed them as parallels to the Ark (e.g., Morgenstern 1942; de Vaux 1965: 9, 296–297), and since that time they have been adopted somewhat

uncritically into the scholarly literature. Nevertheless, the items are rather distinct in appearance and function, and each has its own history. The *ʿutfa* generally refers to the hooded camel saddle used by married women of Sudan, Arabia, Tripoli, etc. It cannot be traced to pre-Islamic times. See Robinson (1931b). Tradition places the origin of the *maḥmal* in Mamluk Cairo in the thirteenth century CE. See Robinson (1931a). The *markab* and *abu-dhūr* appear to be synonyms for the ostrich-feather litter that sits upon camels. They are recorded in premodern Bedouin society, but not pre-Islamic society. See Musil (1928: 571–574). The Egyptian *markab* cannot be dated before the eleventh century CE, when the Persian traveler Nasir-i Khusrau described its use in conjunction with a Nile inundation ceremony, see Sanders (1994: 103). Only the *qubba* dates to pre-Islamic times, as it is represented on the temple of Bel at Palmyra (first century CE). Nevertheless, all of these litters are tent-like structures, and thus, they are more fruitfully compared to the tabernacle. See Homan (2002: 90–94). Homan does not discuss the *abu-dhur*. The Hebrew cognate *qubbāh* in Num 25:8 also refers to a tent.

**Fig. 17.2** Bedouin *utfa*

sedentary community, since the Israelite priests carried it on foot (Haran 1985: 270). Moreover, as Michael Homan has shown (Homan 2002: 113–114), the strongest parallels for the tabernacle in which the Ark was placed are ancient Egyptian military and funerary tents including the tent-like coverings for funerary barks.<sup>14</sup> This suggests even greater propriety in looking to Egypt for an analogue.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Curiously, Homan (2002: 113) does not discuss a possible parallel between the Ark and the Egyptian bark, but instead he notes that Ramesses' golden throne appears in the Qadesh record as "flanked by falcon wings, just as the Ark is flanked by winged cherubim." Moreover, Homan (2002: 145–147) notes that the construction of the tabernacle's frame employs the term *qerāšim* "(thin) boards," a word of nautical importance that elsewhere (i.e., Ezek 27:6) refers to the main cabin on a boat. See also Kitchen (1993: 119–129).

<sup>15</sup> We may add to this the fact that biblical tales set in Egypt often show a close knowledge of Egyptian practices and beliefs and, in some cases, draw upon Egyptian literary traditions. See, e.g., Sarna (1986) and the

### Egyptian Sacred Barks

With this in mind, I should like to propose that the Egyptian sacred bark offers a more compelling and complete parallel for the Ark. Of course, the bark was not merely a boat, but a sacred ritual object deeply imbedded in the ritual and mythological landscapes of the Egyptians. Though they resembled boats, they rarely, if ever, were set in water. Even when they needed to cross the Nile, they were loaded onto barges. Usually, they were carried by hand or in some cases dragged on a sledge or placed on a wagon (Fig. 17.3).<sup>16</sup>

The bark's most basic function was to transport gods and mummies. When transporting gods, the bark was fitted with a gold-plated naos containing a divine image seated on a *ḥwt-*

brief discussion by Currid (1997: 23–32) and his bibliography.

<sup>16</sup> Photograph of sacred barks at Medinet Habu by the author.



**Fig. 17.3** Barks on stands with carrying poles, Medinet Habu



block throne,<sup>17</sup> which was veiled with a thin canopy of wood or cloth (Fig. 17.4).<sup>18</sup>

When transporting the dead, it carried the sarcophagus within a covered gold-plated catafalque (Fig. 17.5).<sup>19</sup> There is no one type of

sacred bark, but rather many variations on a theme, each with its own set of accouchement.<sup>20</sup>

Many barks were decorated with protective *kerubim*, such as the naos of the bark of Amun

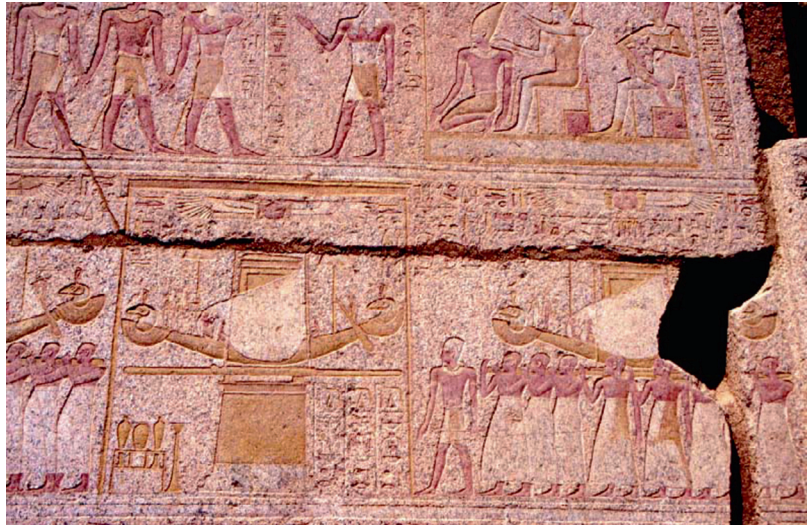
<sup>17</sup> On the *hwt*-block throne, *srh*-block throne, and the “lion-throne,” see Kuhlmann (2008). For a comparative work on thrones, see Metzger (1985).

<sup>18</sup> The veiled bark of Amun here comes from a relief at Karnak, photographed by the author.

<sup>19</sup> The photograph of the bark transporting the catafalque in the tomb of Userhat (TT 56) was taken by the author.

<sup>20</sup> See Göttlicher (1992: 13–75), who divides the cultic barks into four basic types: those belonging to districts, states, gods, or of non-locale or unspecified nature, with each category containing many variations. Most of the barks are given epithet-like names, though the general term for bark appears to have been *wi3*, perhaps related to the verb *wi3* “to be separated, secluded, segregated.” See WÄS 1982: 272.

**Fig. 17.4** Veiled bark of Amun, Karnak



found on Seti I's mortuary temple in Qurna (Fig. 17.6, left) and the bark of Horus in the temple at Edfu (Fig. 17.6, right).<sup>21</sup>

Like the Ark of the Covenant, sacred barks were carried on poles by priests, the so-called pure ones (Egyptian: *w'bw*), who had performed purification rituals in order to hoist the bark. Though most Egyptian rituals were never witnessed by the public, the procession of the sacred bark was an important exception. It was the focus of an intense series of festivals throughout the year, as many as five to ten per month, which involved loud music and dancing.<sup>22</sup>

During the celebrations, priests carried the bark from one shrine to another, and made stops along the way, during which they dramatized mythological scenes. The route and length of the processions varied depending on the gods they carried and their mythologies.<sup>23</sup>

The bark also gave oracles. While resting at one of the stations it could be consulted by written oracles, and while en route during the procession, it could be asked a question to which it would respond yes or no by bowing fore or aft. Some priests marched before the bark wafting incense and others alongside and behind. Some bore standards representing nomes, much like the tribal procession of the Ark of the Covenant (Barta 1965–66).

While I know of no sacred bark whose footstool contained relics, the placing of oaths beneath the feet of statues is attested. Thus, in a letter from Ramesses II to the Hittite king Hattusilis III, we find the following reference: “The writing of the covenant that [I made] to the Great King, and which the King of Hattu has made with me, lies beneath the feet of [the god Ra]. The great gods are witnesses [to it].”<sup>24</sup> Scholars have long likened this practice to the

<sup>21</sup> Photographs by the author.

<sup>22</sup> Stadler (2008). On Theban barks, see Bell (1985: 251–294).

<sup>23</sup> See Sauneron (1960: 93); Teeter (2011: 56–75).

<sup>24</sup> A copy of the letter also was placed at the feet of the Hittite god Teshub. On the correspondence between these kings see Edel (1994: 1/16–29, 2/27–29). For the Egyptian texts of the treaty, see Kitchen (1971: 225–232); Edel (1983: 135–153). Note that Beckman (1996: 125) treats the god in the broken portion of the letter as the Hittite storm god.

**Fig. 17.5** Bark on catafalque, tomb of Userhat



placing of the covenantal tablets in the Ark's footstool.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, from the 18th Dynasty well into the Roman period, Egyptians fashioned statues of the god Ptah-Sokar-Osiris standing upright on their own coffins (Fig. 17.7).<sup>26</sup>

Of interest here is that the coffins often housed copies of the *Book of the Dead* or small corn mummies. While the Ramesside letter and statue are not exact parallels to the Ark, they share the concept of texts placed beneath the feet of a god.

Like their divine counterparts, funerary barks functioned as a means of transport and mythological invocation. However, rather than transport images, they ferried the deceased to their tombs. As in the festivals, loud music accompanied burial processions. These processions too were public, though the number of attendees naturally varied.<sup>27</sup>

The bark's trip to the tomb invoked the journey of the sun as it sailed to the land of the west. Like Ra in his solar bark,<sup>28</sup> the deceased hoped to sail on a cycle of renewal and emerge with him at dawn.

Even from this cursory treatment, it should be clear that the Ark and the bark share much in common in both design and function, and each, in its own way, was connected to a historicized

<sup>25</sup> See already Herrmann (1908). The platforms on which Arks were placed also sometimes stored texts. Thus, spell 64 of the *Book of Going Forth by Day* (lines 25–26) concludes by noting that the spell was discovered by a master-worker in a plinth belonging to the god of the *Hennu*-bark (i.e., Sokar or Horus). P. London BM EA 10477 (P. Nu), Tb 064 Kf (line 25), P. Cairo CG 51189 (P. Juya), Tb 064 (line 284). Moreover, in the 18th Dynasty the term *s.t wr.t* “great seat,” which usually referred to the throne of a king or a god, came to be used for the pedestal on which one rested a divine bark or the bark shrine itself. Eventually, it became a metonym for the temple. See McClain (2007: 88–89). Herrmann (1908: 299–300) also draws attention to the parallel. In 1 Samuel 10:25, Samuel also places a scroll containing the duties of kingship before the Ark.

<sup>26</sup> The Late Period exemplar shown here is courtesy of the British Museum (E9742).

<sup>27</sup> Teeter (2011: 57) remarks: “Festivals also illustrated how little separation there was between the concepts of funerary and nonfunerary practices. For example, festivals of Osiris, the god of the afterlife, were celebrated in the Karnak Temple and recorded in detail at the Temple of Hathor at Dendara, structures that are not usually associated with mortuary cults.”

<sup>28</sup> The solar god rode one boat (*m'nd.t*) during the day and another (i.e., *mst.t*) at night. On the orientation of these boats, see Thomas (1956: 56–79).



**Fig. 17.6** Naoi containing *kerubîm*



mythology of return. Of course, I am not suggesting that the Ark of the Covenant *was in fact* a bark; only that the bark served as a model, which the Israelites adapted for their own needs. Thus, the Israelites conceived of the Ark not as an Egyptian boat with a prow and stern and oars,<sup>29</sup> but as a rectangular object, more akin to the riverine boat that informs the shape of Noah's Ark (6:14–16).<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, some of the bark's other aspects remained meaningful in Israelite priestly culture. It still represented a throne and a footstool and so it still served as a symbol

of the divine presence. It continued to be a sacred object that one could consult for oracles, and its maintenance continued to be the exclusive privilege of the priests.

Moreover, there is evidence that it retained the chthonic import of its Egyptian prototype. In part this comes from the very name that the Israelites gave the object, an *'arōn*, which also, and perhaps primarily, means “coffin.”<sup>31</sup> As such it appears in the narratives concerning the deaths of the patriarch Jacob (Gen 50:1–14) and his son Joseph (Gen 50:26), both of whom were embalmed according to Egyptian practice and placed in an *'arōn*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Of course, the Israelites dispensed with the Egyptian practice of placing an image of the God's head on the prow and stern.

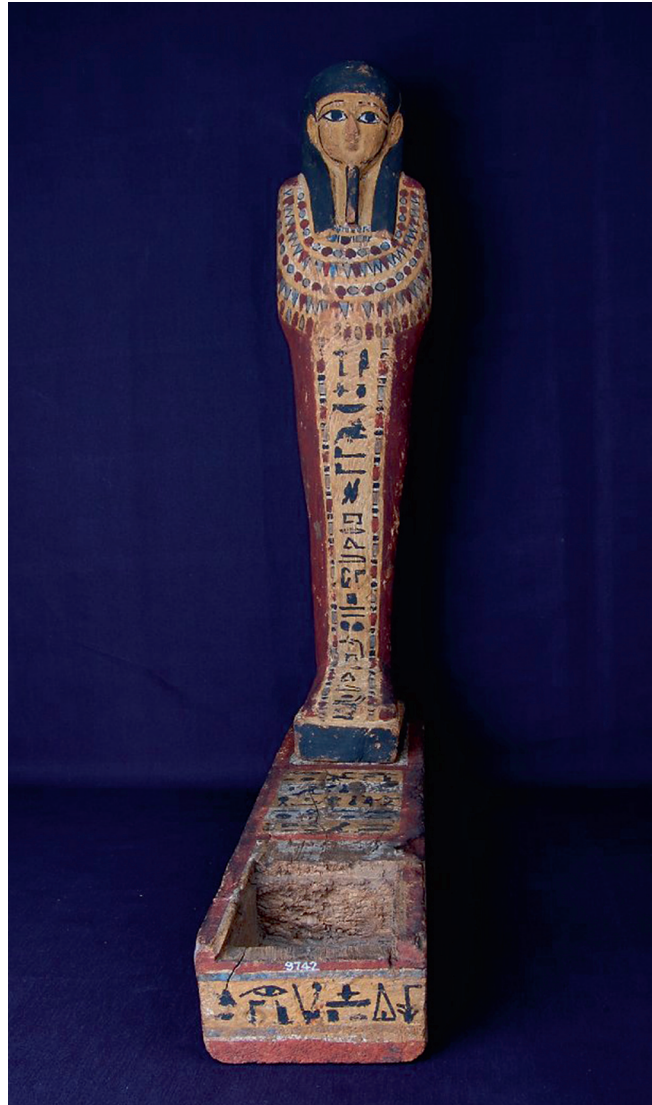
<sup>30</sup> The term for Noah's Ark is *tēbāh* (Gen 6:14). It is also used for the small chest into which the infant Moses was floated to safety (Exod 2:3, 2:5). The word *tēbāh* is a loan from the Egyptian *ḏb3(t)* “naos, casket, socket for a throne.” Interestingly, like the Hebrew word *kissē* “throne,” the Israelites did not use the term *tēbāh* for the Ark of the Covenant, even though it was available to them. It is plausible that the Israelites used the term *'arōn* instead of *tēbāh* (or *kissē* “throne”), because it distinguished the object from a boat while retaining its chthonic associations. On the Hebrew and Egyptian lexemes, see HALOT, p. 1678, s.v. תִּבְיָה; WĀS 5: 555–562, and Hannig (1995: 1003), s.v. *ḏb3(t)*. The meaning “coffin” is spelled *ḏb3(t)*. On the word as a loan into Hebrew, see Muchiki (1999: 258). On the LXX's rendering of both *'arōn* and *tēbāh* as κιβωτός, see Loewe (2001).

<sup>31</sup> The word *'arōn* appears in 2 Kgs 12:9–16 (=2 Chron 24:8–12), where it is often translated “(money) chest.” However, the passage carefully states that the priest Jehoida took an *'arōn* and bored a hole into its lid (i.e., *delet*, lit. door). This clarifies that the coffin was repurposed as a coffer. The Akkadian cognate *arānu* similarly means coffin and cashbox, CAD A 2, p. 231, s.v. *arānu*. Note also that the Phoenician cognate *'arōn* appears on a number of royal memorial inscriptions in reference to heavily Egyptianized Phoenician sarcophagi. See KAI, nos. 1, 9, 13, 13, 29. If the wood used to build the Ark (i.e., *šittīm* “acacia”) is to be identified with *spina aegyptiaca*, then it is noteworthy that the Egyptians also used it to construct coffins.

<sup>32</sup> Gen 50:2 states that Joseph ordered his servants and physicians to do the embalming, but they are not identified as Egyptians.



**Fig. 17.7** Ptah-Sokar-Osiris figure standing on coffin



Underscoring the chthonic nature of the *ʾarōn* is its frequent association with threshing floors. See, for example, the account of Joseph's return to Canaan:

When they reached the threshing floor of the bramble, near the Jordan, they lamented loudly and bitterly; and there Joseph observed a seven-day period of mourning for his father. When the Canaanites who lived there saw the mourning at the threshing floor of the bramble, they said, "The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning." That is why that place near the Jordan is called *Ābēl-Miṣrayīm* (lit. the "Mourning of the Egyptians," Gen 50:10–11).

The narrator does not say why the procession stopped here, but readers *are* forced to wonder, because Jacob was to be buried at Machpelah (Gen 49:30).<sup>33</sup> Also unclear is what the Canaanites saw that suggested an *Egyptian*

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Sarna (1989: 348), who asks "Why does the procession stop at just this place?" and suggests that the region might have had Egyptian connections.

mourning practice.<sup>34</sup> While the text mentions the presence of Egyptian officials, they were far outnumbered by the elders of Israel, the household of Joseph and his brothers, and all the members of their father's household. Indeed, Gen 50:9 states that the group constituted a *ham-mahaneh kâbêd me'ôd*, "an exceedingly large camp." We are told nothing of professional wailing women nor of people dancing nor of an Opening of the Mouth ceremony. Even the length of the event, 7 days, suggests an Israelite mourning practice.<sup>35</sup> Instead, the narrator twice states that the rite took place at a threshing floor. We must consider this as more than a passing reference, for throughout the Near East threshing floors were regarded as numinous places rich with chthonic and fertility associations, and thus, they were loci for cultic activity.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the mourning over the men whom Yahweh slew for looking into the Ark in 1 Sam 6:18–19. On the peculiarities of this passage and proposed connection to Ark narratives, see Tur-Sinai (1951: 275–286).

<sup>35</sup> When Jacob died, the narrator noted that the Egyptians bewailed him for 70 days (Gen 50:3). Herodotus relates that the body was placed in niter for 70 days (*Histories* 2.86). Diodorus Siculus states that the preparation of the body took 30 days and the wailing another 72 days (*Histories* 1.91). However, Job and his friends mourn for 7 days (Job 2:13). Cf. 1 Chron 10:12.

<sup>36</sup> Aranov (1977) supplies a wealth of comparative data on the subject, though his approach is rather Frazerian in orientation. For the cultic use of the threshing floor in Mesopotamia, see Jacobsen (1975: 65–97). At Ugarit, threshing floors also were tied to mourning and fertility rites and used as sites for divination (*CAT* 1.141–145, 1.155) and summoning the dead (*CAT* 1.20–22). Similar cultic activity took place in the Aegean world (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, 185–189). The threshing floor shared a number of these associations in ancient Israel as well. Thus, Gideon sought an oracle by means of divination at a threshing floor (Judg 6:11–20). Prophecy and royal judgment also took place there (1 Kgs 22:10–11), the latter, even during the period of the Sanhedrin (Aranov 1977: 161–176). The association of the threshing floor with fertility is suggested also in the book of Ruth, in which Ruth and Boaz have sex at a threshing floor (Ruth 3). See also Hos 9:1. That some sexual activity took place in or near the Israelite temple is clear by legal and prophetic pronouncements against such acts (see, e.g., Deut 23:18–19, Hos 4:14, 1 Kgs 14:24, 15:12, 22:38–47, 2 Kgs 23:7, Jer 2:20, 5:7, Ezek 16:31, Mic 1:7). See also Littauer et al. (1990: 15–23).

However, since the Canaanites identified the mourning ritual as an Egyptian practice, we must ask more specifically what cultic significance the threshing floor had in Egypt.

In Egypt, the threshing floor was most widely associated with Osiris and his cult. I need not dwell here on the complex origins and nature of Osiris.<sup>37</sup> Suffice it to say that he was connected *inter alia* to the resurrection of the dead<sup>38</sup>; and though the etymology of his name is disputed, it is clear already in the Pyramid Texts that the Egyptians identified him with a divine throne, perhaps as the "Seat of Creation" or the "Throne of the Eye (i.e., Sun)."<sup>39</sup> The identification of Osiris with new grain is attested abundantly in the mythological corpora as well as in ritual practices, such as the making of corn mummies and Osiris beds,<sup>40</sup> the rites found in the *Dramatic Ramesside Papyrus*,<sup>41</sup> and the "Driving of the Calves" (*hwi bḥsw*) ritual.<sup>42</sup> The latter rite was enacted at a number of public festivals,<sup>43</sup> during which the threshing of grain was interpreted as the dismemberment of Osiris.<sup>44</sup> After mourning

<sup>37</sup> On the complex history of Osiris and the use of corn mummies, see Griffiths (1980).

<sup>38</sup> Though neither Osiris nor the deceased whom he judged ever returned to the land of the living. Instead, they were resurrected in the afterlife.

<sup>39</sup> *Pyr.* 2054. See Griffiths (1980: 87–99). On the etymology of his name, see Kuhlmann (1975: 135–138) and Westendorf (1977: 95–113).

<sup>40</sup> Griffiths (1980: 167–168); Tooley (1996: 167–179).

<sup>41</sup> See Sethe (1928); Gardiner (1955); Quack (2006: 72–89); and Geisen (2012).

<sup>42</sup> The verb *hwi* means "beating, threshing." See Egberts (1995) for a comprehensive study of this ritual. Though details mainly come from temples of the Graeco-Roman period, the original contexts for the ritual belong to Theban festival processions for Osiris in the Ramesside period, which themselves derive in part from festivals at Memphis (Egberts 1995: 182–183).

<sup>43</sup> Including the Sokar festival, Osiris Mystery, Min festival, festival of Behdet, Opet festival, and perhaps also the festival of the first month of summer. See Egberts (1995: 412).

<sup>44</sup> The ritual also involved the royal consecration of four *mr.t*-chests, reliquaries that contained four differently colored linen bandages for Osiris' mummy. Some texts appear to refer to garments worn by a divine statue, but their use as bandages for the mummification of Osiris is

over Osiris, his members were reunited, reinvigorated, and concealed beneath the threshing floor.<sup>45</sup>

Since the mourning rites for Osiris took place at a threshing floor, we perhaps can understand why the Canaanites perceived the Israelites' mourning for Jacob as an Egyptian event, and while the narrator does not offer more than the twofold mention of the threshing floor by way of explanation, the references to the embalming of the patriarchs and their interments in an *'arōn* naturally evoke an Egyptian, if not Osirian, subtext.<sup>46</sup>

Additional support comes from a number of talmudic and midrashic traditions, which Rivkah Ulmer has shown<sup>47</sup> to draw heavily upon Osiris mythology when discussing the burial of Joseph in an *'arōn* and the bringing of his bones back to Canaan.<sup>48</sup> Like Osiris, Joseph is said to be buried

among the kings and also in the Nile. According to midrash, the Egyptians placed Joseph in a metal coffin and buried him in the Nile in order to bless the river with fertility. Later Moses summons the coffin from the water by using language and paraphernalia suggestive of Egyptian magic.<sup>49</sup> When the coffin surfaces, it is then compared to a sprouting stalk of reed. Moses then carries the coffin away on his shoulders, much like a sacred bark, with all of Israel in procession.

Moreover, like the Egyptian *'arōn* in which the patriarchs were buried, the Ark of the Covenant was associated with new grain and the threshing floor. Thus, we find that the Ark's miraculous crossing of the Jordan took place during harvest time (Josh 3:15).<sup>50</sup> Later, when the Philistines captured the Ark they placed it in the temple of Dagon (1 Sam 1:5). Like Osiris, Dagon was associated with new grain and fertility<sup>51</sup> and possessed chthonic aspects,<sup>52</sup> with titles linking him to rites for the dead.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, the chthonic aspect

their primary function. The boxes were consecrated by dragging them and beating them with scepters, as one would do to grain. Since the *mr.t*-chests represented the cardinal points, the rite enacted the king's dominion over Egypt and his leading of Egypt to the gods. Another rite involved the carrying of two sticks, one topped with a serpent's head. According to one text, each stick represented one half of a severed worm. This ritual was interpreted as driving out the enemy, like a worm, which is both a grain eater and corpse eater. The ritual of the *mr.t*-chests preceded that of the driving of the calves, the former rite standing for the mummification of Osiris and the latter for the protection of his tomb after burial. During the Osiris Mystery, these rites were performed at the necropolis over an underground structure in which Osiris effigies were interred (Egberts 1995: 185, 388, 438–439).

<sup>45</sup> On rituals for assembling Osiris' body, see Egberts (1995: 200).

<sup>46</sup> In Egyptian mythology and ritual, the living king Horus (in the form of pharaoh) performs the mourning rites for his father and deceased king Osiris. Interestingly, in Gen 50:10–11, Joseph mourns for his father, the deceased patriarch Jacob.

<sup>47</sup> See Ulmer (2009: 107–142), for the texts paraphrased here (i.e., Exod. Rab. 20:19, Deut. Rab. 11:7, b. Soṭah 13a, Mek. de Rabbi Ishmael, Pesiq. Rab. Kah. 11, Vayehi Beshallah) and additional evidence.

<sup>48</sup> There is some discrepancy concerning when Joseph's body was taken from Egypt. Exod 13:19 states that Moses took the bones of Joseph with him. Jub 46:9 claims that the Israelites took all the bones of Jacob's sons from Egypt, except those of Joseph. Josephus, *Antiquities*,

2.195–200, places the retrieval of Joseph's bones at a much later time.

<sup>49</sup> That Moses was learned in Egyptian magic appears also in Acts 7:22, Pliny, *Mos.* 1.6, 1.21, 1.24.

<sup>50</sup> Here the spring barley harvest is meant, since Josh 5:10 mentions the celebration of the passover.

<sup>51</sup> The Hebrew word for grain is *dāgān*. It appears in conjunction with the threshing floor in Num 18:27. The prophet Hosea too punfully identifies Dagon with the threshing floor (Hos 9:1). On Dagon, see Singer (1992: 431–450); Healey (1999: 216–219); and Felie (2003: 279–280). On the identification of Dagon as a god of storms, see Green (2003: 63–72). However, see Schwemer (2001), for a more exhaustive treatment of weather gods, which does not include Dagon. If Dagon was in any way identified with Osiris, then the story of the dismemberment of Dagon's statue before the Ark of the Covenant would echo the mythology of Osiris' dismemberment. However, I have found no evidence for the connection. For the view that the dismemberment represents the brutality of warfare as seen in Ugaritic texts, see Wiggins (1993).

<sup>52</sup> See already Roberts (1972: 18–19), who argues that this occurs chiefly through his identification with Enlil and the types of sacrifices offered to him, which are identified as sacrifices for the dead.

<sup>53</sup> At Terqa, his temple was called the “temple of the funerary ritual” (Akkadian: *bīt-kispi*). See Felie (2003: 96). At Mari, he was given the epithet *bēl pagrē*, i.e.,



of the Israelite Ark and its association with grain were not lost on the Philistines.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, when the Philistines found their god dismembered before the Ark, they sent it back on a newly constructed wagon. When it reached Beth-Shemesh, the villagers were harvesting grain (1 Sam 6:15).

Later, in David's time, the Ark was heading to the threshing floor of Nakhon,<sup>55</sup> when Yahweh killed a layperson for touching it (2 Sam 6:6).<sup>56</sup> Even when the Ark accompanied the Israelites on the battlefield, it was housed in a *sukkāh*, a temporary "booth" made from foliage (2 Sam 11:11).<sup>57</sup> This term, of course, lies behind the name for the Festival of Sukkoth, which commemorates the Israelites' exodus from Egypt (Lev 23:42, Deut 16:13–16, Zech 14:16–19, Ezra 3:4, Neh 8:14–17).<sup>58</sup> When

David conquered Jerusalem, he purchased the city's main threshing floor after encountering an angel there (2 Sam 24:16–17). He then built an altar on the spot in order to avert a plague, which the Septuagint places during the wheat harvest (2 Sam 24:15–25, 1 Chron 21:16).<sup>59</sup> In a lengthy procession amidst music, shouting, frenetic dancing, and burnt offerings, David later would don a priestly linen ephod, lead the Ark to the threshing floor, and place it in a tent.<sup>60</sup> David marked the event as a fertility rite by giving the people gifts of bread loaves and cakes of dates and raisins (2 Sam 6:19).<sup>61</sup> The same threshing floor became the site on which Solomon built the temple (1 Kgs 6:19, 8:1–9, 2 Chron 3:1). Moreover, Solomon moved the Ark into the temple during the Festival of Sukkoth (1 Kgs 8:2),<sup>62</sup> which necessitated processions, dancing, and sacrifices.<sup>63</sup>

"Lord of the Dead." See G. Dossin, *ARM* 10 63:15–16, C. -F. Jean, *ARM* 2 90; 137: 43–44, J.-R. Kupper, *ARM* 3 40. Cf. Ezek 43:7. At Ugarit too he received sacrifices to the deceased. See Neiman (1948) and Dussaud (1935).

<sup>54</sup> Note also the narrator's statement in 1 Sam 23:1 that the Philistines were fighting at Qeilah and plundering its threshing floors. This act led David to seek Yahweh's oracle twice, presumably by way of the Ark, as to whether to battle the Philistines (1 Sam 23:2–4).

<sup>55</sup> The word *nākōn* might also be read as an adjective meaning "prepared, right." 1 Chron 13:9 reads *kīdōn* instead of *nākōn*. Tur-Sinai (1951: 282–285) argues that *nākōn* and *kīdōn* refer to "pestilence" and "affliction."

<sup>56</sup> The Ark also was stored in private homes such as that of Abinadab, whose house, which the narrator twice emphasizes, was located on "the hill" (2 Sam 6:3–4), and of Obed-Edom (2 Sam 6:10–11), whose household prospered on account of the Ark.

<sup>57</sup> According to Lev 23:40–41, the foliage included "good fruits," "palm branches," "boughs of leafy trees," and "willows of the brook." This differs slightly in Neh 8:15, which calls for "olive branches," "branches of wild olive," "myrtle branches," "palm branches," and "branches of thick trees." The Mishnah clarifies the fruit as a "citron" (Sukkah I iii 8; I iii 12). The Mishnah's prohibition against using any plants from an Asherah (Sukkah I iii 1–3, 5) implies that at one time some people did obtain foliage from an Asherah, thus again attesting to the festival's early fertility associations.

<sup>58</sup> Note that Neh 8:14 historicizes the festival of Sukkoth as an institution created to remember the Israelite's departure from Egypt. Nevertheless, as 8:17 clarifies: "... the Israelites had not done so from the days of Joshua son of Nun to that day." I take this gloss to refer not to the

festival itself, but to the erection of booths within the courtyards of the temple (8:16), i.e., an innovation that required historical justification.

<sup>59</sup> See the *Kaige* recension of the LXX for 2 Sam 24:15. Araunah (also called Ornan) was a Jebusite and, thus, an inhabitant of Jebus (i.e., Jerusalem) before David conquered it. Araunah appears to be a Hittite name or title. See Sayce (1921) and Rosén (1955). Wyatt (1985) argues that "the Araunah" (the name contains the definite article in 2 Sam 24:16) was the last Jebusite king (cf. Ezek 16:1).

<sup>60</sup> 1 Chron 15:27 adds that David was wearing a robe of fine linen as were also the Levites, singers, and Chenaniah, the music master. The passage lists the instruments as including a shofar, trumpets, cymbals, loud harps, and lyres.

<sup>61</sup> The event was identified as a fertility rite by Smelik (1992: 52–53), though I disagree with his dating of the narrative to the post-exilic period. On raisin cakes as a fertility food, see also Hos 3:1 and Song 2:5. The biblical writer has inverted the theme of fertility by informing the reader at story's end that David's wife Michal died childless (2 Sam 6:23).

<sup>62</sup> The passage refers to the month by its Canaanite name Ethanim, rather than Tishri, the name used after the introduction of the Babylonian calendar. 2 Macc 10:6–8 also informs us that the temple's renovation closely followed the pattern of the Festival of Ingathering.

<sup>63</sup> Sukkoth here is referred to simply as "the Festival" (*he-ḥāg*). See similarly in 1 Kgs 8:65, Ezek 45:23, Neh 8:14, and 2 Chron 7:8. Ezra 3:1–7 links the dedication of the altar with Sukkoth. On Sukkoth, see Haran 1985: 298–300. A similar annual harvest festival existed at

Such references suggest a correlation between the Ark's movement and the harvest and again demonstrate that the Hebrew *'arōn*, whether understood as an Egyptian coffin or the Ark of the Covenant, was intimately connected to threshing floors and their fructifying and chthonic associations.<sup>64</sup>

Shiloh in the period of the Judges (see Judg 21:19–23). Perhaps this explains the Ark's trip to Shiloh in 1 Sam 3:1–31. The Mishnah elucidates the passage in Judges by connecting it to courtship rites: "And the daughters of Jerusalem went forth in the vineyards. And what did they say? 'Young man, lift up your eyes and see who you would choose for yourself (as a wife). Set not your eyes on beauty, but set your eyes on family'" (Ta'anith iv 8). Note also the mention in Judg 9:27 of a vintage feast at Shechem before Yahweh was worshiped there. See the insightful query and response concerning celebration during Sukkoth found in Sukkah iv 4: "How was the rite of the palm branch fulfilled [on the Sabbath]? If the first festival day of the Feast fell on a Sabbath, they brought their palm branches to the Temple Mount and their ministers took them and set them in order on the roof of the portico, but the elders set theirs in a [special] chamber. The people were taught to say, 'Whoever gets my palm branch, let it be his as a gift.' The next day they came early and the ministers threw the palm branches down before them and the people snatched at them and beat each other." The beatings mentioned here clearly mimic the act of threshing. Compare, e.g., the similar report of R. Jonathan b. Baroka who noted: "They use to bring palm branches and beat them on the ground at the sides of the Altar, and that day was called, 'The day of the branch threshing'" (Sukkah iv 6).

<sup>64</sup> Moreover, each of the sanctuaries that the Ark visited has chthonic associations and connections to fertility. In 1 Sam 7:1, the men of Kiriath-jearim move the Ark to the house of a man named Aminadab, which is said to be on a hill. The gloss concerning the hilltop suggests that it was an open space, much like those on which threshing floors were situated. On the connection between threshing floors and high places in ancient Israel, see Aranov (1977: 51–52). Note also that we are told that the Ark rested there for 20 years, during which the people "mourned" (i. e., *תָּנְּנוּ* in 1 Sam 7:2). The verb used here usually appears in reference to mourning for the dead. Though the account of the Ark at the fall of Jericho contains no reference to grain, the circumambulation of the city seven times is suggestive of pilgrimage dances and the round shape of the threshing floor (note the pleonastic etymological connection between Hebrew *חַג* "Festival" and *חֹג* "circle, vault of heaven"). It is of note that the Mishnah describes the rituals that took place on the seventh day of Sukkoth as including the blowing of the shofar and a sevenfold circumambulation of the altar with willow branches (Sukkah iv 5). Moreover, each of the sanctuaries that housed

## Possible Context for the Integration and Adaptation of the Bark into the Israelite Cult

To this point, I have argued that Egyptian sacred barks served as models for the Israelite Ark of the Covenant and that consequently the two objects

the Ark in the pre-monarchic period has numinous, chthonic, and fertility associations. At Gilgal, Joshua erected 12 stones to commemorate the Ark's miraculous crossing of the Jordan River (Josh 4:19–24). Joshua reinstituted the rite of circumcision at Gilgal (Josh 5:2–6), and there Yahweh gave him an oracle (Josh 10:8). Judg 3:19 mentions Gilgal as a place known for its "carved idols" (*pāsīlīm*). Later prophets associate the site with idolatry and temple prostitution (e.g., Hos 4:15, 9:15, 12:11, Amos 4:4, 5:5). The sanctuary site of Shechem is connected to fertility in that it was set up near an oak tree (Gen 12:6–7, Josh 24:26, Judg 9:6). Judg 8:33, 9:44 associates Shechem with Baal-Berith. Moreover, when Joshua renewed the covenant there, he commemorated the occasion by erecting a stone (Josh 24:26). Bokhim (lit. "weepers") is given an aetiology that connects it to a divine encounter during which the people acknowledged following other gods and wept (Judg 2:1–5). This pericope suggests that mourning rites were performed there. Bethel was the site of a divine encounter with the patriarch Jacob after which he erected a *maššēbāh* and anointed it with oil (Gen 28:10–19). Hos 12:4 adds that this event was accompanied by weeping. Bethel was also the site of a mourning rite during which the Israelites wept (Judg 20:26, 21:2–4). Though dating from a later period (fourth c. BCE), Papyrus Amherst 63 attests to bovine imagery at Bethel and associates it with a fusion between Yahweh and Horus. See Nims and Steiner (1983: 261–274). At Shiloh, Joshua cast lots before Yahweh in order to divine which lands belonged to which tribes (Josh 18:1). Shiloh also is the site of a harvest festival during which young men selected spouses from among the young women who danced in the vineyards (Judg 21:19–24). The event was precipitated by the aforementioned mourning of the tribe of Benjamin at Bethel. When the Ark stayed at Kiriath-jearim it was placed on a hilltop (1 Sam 7:1–2). Initially, it was not an Israelite settlement, but rather a Hivite one (Josh 9:7–17), and at one time it was home to the cult of Baal, as its other name Kiriath-Baal attests (Josh 15:9, 15:60, 18:4, 1 Chron 13:6). On Kiriath-jearim and its relationship to Gibeon, see Blenkinsopp (1969). Gibeon was the seat of an ancient sanctuary called "the great high place" (1 Kgs 3:4). This site too is characterized as numinous. Thus, during the battle at Gibeon, Yahweh halted the motion of the sun (Josh 10:12–13), and Joshua allotted it to the Levites, making it a priestly town (18:25, 21:17). Later God appeared and spoke to Solomon at Gibeon (1 Kgs 3:4, 1 Kgs 9:2, 1 Chron 1:2–7).

share much in common in design, function, and cosmic import. While no particular bark can be singled out as a prototype for the Ark's design, the object's associations with death and fertility, its close relationship with the threshing floor, and the mention of the Israelites' practice of Egyptian embalming in conjunction with the *'arōn* are suggestive of the cult of Osiris.<sup>65</sup>

Exactly how and when the object became an appurtenance of the Israelite cult is difficult to say since biblical texts mythologize the Ark's creation. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence suggests that the Late Bronze Age provided the best opportunity,<sup>66</sup> because it saw an increased Egyptian presence in the Levant (Giveon 1978; Wimmer 1990: 1065–1106; Nakhai 2001). The Egyptians built garrisons, administrative offices, and Egypto-Canaanite temples to facilitate the

collection of grain.<sup>67</sup> The Canaanite elites, meanwhile, often sought to emulate Egyptian customs (Higginbotham 1996: 154–169). Of course, they did not adopt Egyptian practices wholesale, but adapted them to fit their own religions, as Beth Nakhai observes:

These temples blended Egyptian structural or decorative elements with Canaanite architectural forms. Egyptian ritual and other objects were found alongside Canaanite cultic paraphernalia. Iconography often exhibited qualities of synthesis rather than exclusivity, but in general the gods and goddesses of Canaan prevailed (Nakhai 2001: 154–155).<sup>68</sup>

The Late Bronze Age also saw movements of Canaanites and Egyptians in both directions, and it is at this time that the Merneptah stele records the earliest written evidence for Israelites in Canaan. This was a formative and flexible period in the history of Israelite religion as it also saw the gradual fusion of the Canaanite god El with Yahweh.<sup>69</sup> However, of particular relevance here

<sup>65</sup> Barkay (1994) has shown that Egyptian embalming practices were employed by some within Israel well into the Iron Age. See also Zevit (2001: 247, n. 198), who, citing Barkay's study on embalmment in Israel, observes: "... perhaps some Nilotic mythology accompanied the science, if learned from the Egyptians."

<sup>66</sup> It is not my intention to enter the debate concerning the historicity of the Exodus. The subject has been covered amply by biblical scholars, Egyptologists, and archaeologists and little by way of consensus has emerged (as can be seen by many of the essays in this volume). Some suggest that it was a plural phenomenon that took place in stages over time. Others view it as a single but much smaller event. Some scholars identify the nascent Israelites with the marauding *'Apiru*, though in more recent years, the *Shasu* have become the comparative group of choice. See Greenberg (1955); Giveon (1974: 267–271); Redford, (1992: 269–280); and Rainey (2008: 51–55). Dating the Exodus has proved even more difficult, though most positivist views place it sometime between the fourteenth and twelfth centuries B.C.E. In my view, while some of the proto-Israelites might have lived in settlement communities in Egypt, such as the House of Joseph, the Levites, and perhaps elements of the Benjaminite and Judahite tribes, and others might have been among the *Shasu*, the overwhelming archaeological evidence suggests an indigenous Late Bronze Age Canaanite origin for most of the Israelites. In general, I concur with Weinstein (1997: 98), who remarks: "If there was an historical exodus, it probably consisted of a small number of Semites migrating out of Egypt in the late thirteenth or early twelfth century B.C., ultimately settling in southwestern Canaan, where their Egyptian heritage would allow them to melt into the local populace ...."

<sup>67</sup> Temples include those at Apheq, Ashdod, Ashqelon, Beth Shean, Gaza, Jaffa, Lachish, Megiddo, and Tell Abu Hawam. Note in particular the remark of Nakhai (2001: 151) that "Egypt dominated LB II Ashdod and Ashod's sacred site should be considered Egypto-Canaanite." Over a century ago, the remains of an Egypto-Canaanite temple were discovered north of the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem. The finds, which date to the Ramesside period, included an Egyptian stele dedicated to Osiris. Also discovered in 1975 was a serpent statue. See Wimmer (1990: 1073).

<sup>68</sup> A similar process of integration and adaptation in which the foreign elements did not compromise the identity and worship of the local gods obtains in the Iron Age, when Egyptian interests and influence shifted to the Phoenician world, as Giveon (1978: 31) remarks: "In spite of the strong influence of Egyptian culture on the Canaanites in general and Byblos in particular, the fundamental religious concepts of the Egyptians were not copied or even adopted by the peoples of Western Asia: it is only the iconography of the Egyptians which was used as a means of expressing the religious beliefs of the Canaanites. In the process of transfer Egyptian pictorial concepts were changed in varying degrees, the changes being due sometimes to a lack of understanding of their real meaning and sometimes to the need to use similar pictographs to express different ideas."

<sup>69</sup> In some circles, this also led to identifying Asherah as Yahweh's consort. See Olyan (1988: 38–61). On the syncretism of El and Yahweh, see Smith (2003), who



are a great many seals, scarabs, and other objects found in Canaan, which Othmar Keel has shown, attest to the Canaanites' fascination with Memphis and its god Ptah,<sup>70</sup> also known by his syncretistic name, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris.<sup>71</sup> Ptah-Sokar-Osiris was at once the creator, the sun, and judge of the underworld, and he was the patron god of craftsmen. Like Yahweh, he created the world by fiat and was a god of justice who rewarded the righteous and punished sinners with death.<sup>72</sup>

argues that El was first identified as the god of the Exodus and that El was identified with Yahweh in the premonarchic period.

<sup>70</sup> According to Keel (2006: 248), this process began already at the end of the Middle Bronze Age IIB: "The scarabs previously discussed here thus testify to the Middle Bronze Age Canaanites' fervor and enthusiasm for Egyptian culture in general and for the god of Memphis in particular. The predilection for this god can be explained by trade connections with Memphis and by the fact that many of the Canaanites coming to Egypt during the Thirteenth and Fifteenth Dynasties were craftsmen." See also the twelfth century B.C.E. ivory plaques from Megiddo inscribed in honor of a Canaanite temple musician named Kurkur, who had been trained at Memphis and was serving the court of Ashqelon (Wimmer 1990: 1091–1093; Lippke 2011). Florian Lippke has informed me by personal communication (April 15, 2013) of a number of additional scarabs and seals found in the southern Levant that feature Ptah iconography, including those from Abu Hawam, Achsib, a good portion from Tell Agul and Akko, Aschkelon, at least 5 from Beth Shean as well as Der Balah, Dotan, Ekron, En Samije, Tell Eschtori, 13 from Tel Fara, 5 from Tel Gamma, 1 from Gath, 1 from Gerisa, 3 from Gezer, and 1 from Tell Hesi. In Jordan there is one from Amman, one from Tell Deir Alla, and one cylinder seal from there as well. See Zecchi (1996) for the spread of the cult of Osiris after the eleventh century B.C.E.

<sup>71</sup> On the fusion of the three deities already during the Old Kingdom, see Gaballa and Kitchen (1969). Note that unlike some of the other Egyptian festivals, the Festival of the Mystery of Osiris was celebrated throughout the country (Teeter 2011: 59).

<sup>72</sup> Keel (2006: 258–259) discusses four scarabs that feature Ptah standing before Re and Osiris in the form of two birds. He argues that the items demonstrate a knowledge of the concepts represented in the *Memphite Theology*. See Koch (1965), cited by Keel (2006: 261, n. 103). With Schlögl (1980), Keel dates the *Memphite Theology* to the reign of Ramesses II.

It is in this context of Egyptian-Canaanite exchange, Israelite religious syncretism, and Levantine interest in Ptah-Sokar-Osiris that I envision the Israelites' adaptation of the bark. Those features, functions, and associations that the Ark shared with its prototype represented facets of a shared taxonomy, aspects that made sense in both Egyptian and Israelite religious contexts before the object was integrated.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the Ark retained its significance as a throne and footstool and as the symbol of God's presence, and it continued to be a source of oracles. By calling the object an *'arōn*, the Israelites retained the Ark's chthonic associations that resonated with the priestly conception of El Yahweh as a creator god to whom the first fruits are offered (Lev 23:9–14).<sup>74</sup>

On the other hand, those features that did not resonate with the priestly conception of God were refashioned or reconceptualized. Thus, the object's connection to a boat was obscured by referring to it as a "throne and footstool" and by naming it an *'arōn*, which suggested its use as a coffin.<sup>75</sup> These labels served a dual purpose. As a

<sup>73</sup> Note that Yahweh also was connected with horses in his capacity as a solar deity (e.g., 2 Kgs 23:11, Hab 3:8, Mal 4:2, Ps 19:5–7, 84:12). See Ahlström (1984: 22–23) and Stähli (1985).

<sup>74</sup> Interestingly, Exodus 25 portrays Yahweh as a god of craftsman. After giving Moses detailed instructions for building the Ark, he personally selects the craftsmen and fills them with his spirit and wisdom (Exod 35:30–36:7). Note too that the word "firmament" (Heb. *rāqī'a*), which God created to support the heavens in Gen 1:6, derives from a root whose basic meaning is to "beat out metal."

<sup>75</sup> Other cults apparently were more receptive to the notion of a god who can die and be resurrected. Such might account for shared aspects of the Levantine cults of Osiris, Ba'al, and 'Adonis, of which scholars have long been aware. Strange (2004: 350) has argued that the Osiris cult was refracted in or synchronized with the cults of Ba'al and 'Adonis. Redford (1992: 43–44) similarly argues that the comparative study of Osiris, Ba'al, and 'Adonis has fallen into disfavor largely because scholars have tried to distance themselves from the earlier methodological pitfalls that beset the works of Sir James Frazer. According to Redford, scholars have erred too much on the side of caution and have "thrown out the baby with the bath water." For a more recent critical treatment of the topic, see Mettinger (2001). The spread

throne without a statue, the Ark visually conveyed the aniconic nature of Yahweh (see Mettinger 1995). As a casket without a body, it engrained the notion of Yahweh as a god who cannot die. Concomitantly, the deposition of the tablets into the *'arōn* replaced any suggestion of a divine judge of the underworld with objects that represented Yahweh's role as divine judge and lawgiver.<sup>76</sup> Thus, Yahweh became the ruler of

the entire cosmos from the heavens to the underworld,<sup>77</sup> and "threshing" became an idiom for the judgment and dismemberment of *Yahweh's* enemies.<sup>78</sup>

of the cult of Osiris throughout the Mediterranean world is certainly in evidence during the Graeco-Roman period. See, in particular, the host of later myths involving Osiris and/or accounts involving floating chests observed by Plutarch (*De Iside et Osiride*, 15–16) and others and discussed by Holley (1949: 39–47); Griffiths (1980: 28–34). Of note is the depiction of the cult of Osiris on a fresco at Pompeii, which shows a temple devoted to Isis. Within the temple is a naos, which is constructed from the disassembled parts of an Osiris coffin. Inside the naos is painted a bark of Osiris. The fresco shows that the bark of Osiris could be reimagined in other ways outside of Egypt. For an image of the fresco, see Merkelbach (2001: 505).

<sup>76</sup> According to the Hebrew Bible, Aaron's rod stood near the Ark (Num 17:1), though a tradition found in the New Testament (Heb 9:4) places the rod inside the Ark. Nevertheless, much like the Ark itself, the wonders ascribed to it, including its transformation into a serpent (Exod 7:10) and its blossoming and production of almonds (Num 17:8), convey a sense of chthonic power and fertility. Its transformation into a serpent has parallels in Egyptian magical praxis. See Noegel (1997). The parallels to Egyptian magic and the comparative evidence gathered in this essay suggest that the Levites possessed at least some knowledge of Egyptian religious practices. It long has been observed that several individuals connected to the early Israelite priesthood possessed Egyptian names, including Assir, Hofni, Pinehas, Hor, Merari, and of course Moses. See already Noth (1928: 63–64). Some have opined that the name Aaron too is Egyptian. See Spencer (1992) and Muchiki (1999). If one concedes that the Levites possessed knowledge of Egyptian religion, might it also be that the solar bark's encounter with the great serpent Apep informs the Israelite conception of the great serpent Leviathan (also called *tannin*)? Not only is this creature identified with the Pharaoh (Ezek 29:3, 32:2), but its dismemberment by Yahweh is credited with enabling the Israelites to cross the Reed Sea (Isa 51:9–10). In Exod 7:10, Aaron's staff becomes a *tannin* before devouring the serpent-staffs of the Egyptian magicians. Moreover, Ritner (1993: 165–167) has discussed how Egyptian priests employed rituals to ensure the safe nightly passage of the solar bark. These rites involved paralyzing Apep by severing, burning, or otherwise destroying an effigy of the serpent. No such rite is

attested in the Hebrew Bible. However, the many references to the great serpent as an enemy of Yahweh and the role that priests played in maintaining cosmic order through ritual suggest that perhaps we should read more into the etymological connection between the priestly tribe of "Levi" and the "Leviathan" (the etymological connection was first suggested to me by the late Cyrus H. Gordon). As many have pointed out, Ps 74:13–14 refers to the beast as having multiple heads and, thus, more akin to the multi-headed creature *ltn* in Ugaritic texts (e.g., CAT 1.5 I 1–8) and artistic representations from Arslan Tash and Diyala. Nevertheless, some representations of chaos serpents in Egypt also have multiple heads. See, e.g., the panel in the tomb of Tutmosis III (KV 34, chamber J, right wall) that depicts the falcon-headed Sokar overpowering a many-headed chaos serpent in a cave during the fifth hour of the Amduat. Moreover, the aforementioned passage in Psalm 74 is followed rather fittingly with chaotic water and solar imagery in vv. 15–16 with: "You broke the springs and the torrents, you dried ever-flowing streams. To you belongs day and also night, you have prepared the light and the sun." I also note that Isaiah 27 opens by referencing the punishment of Leviathan (v. 1) and concludes with Yahweh threshing his enemies (v. 12). Additional evidence for the Levitical association with serpents appears in Num 21:8–9, in which Moses cures the people of snake bites by fashioning a bronze serpent, and in the later mention that the priests had allowed the item to be venerated until Hezekiah destroyed it (2 Kgs 18:4).

<sup>77</sup> In Isa 66:1 Yahweh declares: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth (*'ereš*) is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?" If the word *'ereš* here means "underworld," as it does elsewhere in the Bible (e.g., Job 10:21–22, Ps 139:15, Isa 44:23, Jonah 2:6) and in Ugaritic and Akkadian texts, then the passage also connects the *kappōreth* "lid/throne" with the heavens and the *'arōn* "Ark/footstool" with the underworld. Since heaven and underworld constitute a more apt merism and a better case of cosmic symmetry than heaven and earth, one naturally might question whether *'ereš* means "underworld" in Gen 1:1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (*'ereš*)."<sup>78</sup> That *'ereš* here might mean underworld is suggested later in Gen 7:11, which describes the cosmic collapse in a way that reverses the processes of creation. Thus, Yahweh rains down the reservoir of heavenly water and ushers up the fountains of the deep.

<sup>78</sup> See, e.g., 2 Kgs 13:7, Isa 21:10, 27:12, Jer 51:33, Hos 13:3, Amos 1:3, Mic 4:12, Hab 3:12. A full discussion appears in Aranov (1977: 177–181).

By the time of the early Israelite monarchy, the Ark, like the god Yahweh, was perceived as entirely Israelite, though memory of its origins likely remained and required negotiation.<sup>79</sup> Hence, it was integrated retroactively into the national epic of the Exodus and intimately tied to Egypt and the first harvest festival.<sup>80</sup> This gave the object an aetiology that distinguished it from Egyptian religious practice,<sup>81</sup> one that served the needs of the priesthood, the royal house, and the national epic. As the centerpiece of the Israelite sanctuary, the Ark of the Covenant stood as the symbolic presence of Yahweh and his legitimation of the Levitical priesthood. As the Lord of Hosts who rides upon the *kerubîm*, the Ark legitimated the royal house and its wars. As an Egyptian object transformed and détourned, it offered visual and literary validation of the Exodus.

<sup>79</sup> The processes of innovation and negotiation find an apt parallel in the establishment of temples at Dan and Bethel under Jeroboam I. To decentralize the religious and political authorities in Jerusalem, Jeroboam set up golden calves in the temples and told the people, “Behold O Israel, your gods who brought you up from the land of Egypt” (1 Kgs 12:28). Jeroboam had strong support from Egypt and even lived there for a time (1 Kgs 11:40, 12:2). On the complex relationship between the account of Jeroboam’s calves and Exodus 32, see Knoppers (1995) and Russell (2009: 41–43). Note that 2 Chron 13:8 appears to understand the calves as a war standard and thus mobile like the Ark of the Covenant. As Russell (2009: 27–30) points out, Jeroboam I’s use of bovine imagery might reflect Egyptian, Syrian, or Mesopotamian influence or the renovation of older imagery associated with El to which Yahweh was fused. In my view, the power of icons lies in their ability to communicate on multiple levels to multiple audiences. A bovine image could have served this purpose.

<sup>80</sup> The Exodus stories appear to have originated in the northern kingdom of Israel and to have been integrated into Judahite historiographical tradition at a later time (see Hoffman 1989; Na’aman 2011). The construction of the Ark with acacia suggests that the Ark’s origins were south of the kingdom of Israel.

<sup>81</sup> On the theory that the Ark narratives serve as an aetiology for its use in the Jerusalem cult, see already Rost (1926), though Rost does not discuss parallels to Egyptian barks.

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