

## **Who can stand before YHWH?: The Ark and Mt Sinai in Chronotopic Perspective.**

**Cameron S. McKenzie**

**Providence College**

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*“To say that the poetic image is independent of causality is to make a rather serious statement. But the causes cited by psychologists and psychoanalysts can never really explain the wholly unexpected nature of the new image, any more than they can explain the attraction it holds for a mind that is foreign to the process of its creation. The poet does not confer the past of his image on me, and yet his image immediately takes root in me. The communicability of an unusual image is a fact of great ontological significance.” (Bachelard 1994: xvii)*

### *Introduction:*

The sudden appearance of the ark in 1 Samuel 4-6 raises many questions for interpreters of the book. Why does a narrative which has as its plot the rise of kingship in Israel, include an unrelated story about the strange adventures of the ark in a foreign land? Why does 1 Samuel 4 begin with an announcement of Samuel’s prophetic ministry and then immediately launch into a story that does not mention Samuel even once? How do the adventures of the ark provide any kind of meaningful introduction to the story of David and Saul? Given the somewhat sporadic appearance of the ark in the holy war narratives of Joshua and the book of Judges, why does the ark suddenly appear at a crucial transition as the main character in a sustained narrative?

The apparent lack of connection with the opening chapters of 1 Samuel or the following story of David and Saul, and, most especially, the absence of Samuel in chapters 4-6 set against the overwhelming presence of Samuel in chapters 1-3 and 7- 28 has led many commentators to conclude that the episode with the ark was not originally a part of the narrative of Samuel, but was later inserted to satisfy the theological agenda of a redactor. In addition, the recapitulation of the ark theme in 2 Samuel 6, when David retrieves the ark from Kiriath-jearim where it was left at the end of 1 Sam 7.1, has prompted scholars to identify the 2 Samuel material with the earlier material in 1 Samuel as a unified narrative, which convention identifies as the “ark narrative”.

*Robert Polzin:*

In recent years attempts have been made to address the book of Samuel with the aid of literary and narrative criticism. While not ruling out the complicated compositional history of Samuel, these works have sought to examine the current Hebrew text as a unified literary entity. One such effort is the work of Robert Polzin, who in a series of books has read the so-called Deuteronomistic History as the unified literary creation of a single author. Polzin identifies the ark material in chapters 4-6 as a continuation of the parabolic genre that he identifies with the opening episode of Samuel and the Elides (Polzin 1989: 60). Thus, “ark narrative” extrudes the process of requesting a king. In this context the ark serves an iconic function, being more than just a cult object, but also a stand in for the entirety of Israel’s experience with Yahweh. Polzin argues that the entire narrative of 1 Samuel 4-6 is motivated by the two Israelite questions at the end of chapter 6: “Who can stand before YHWH?” and “To whom will He go away from us?.” When taken in the light of the preceding experiences of the Israelites in their battles with the Philistines, the experiences of the Philistines and Dagon in the presence of the ark, and the experiences of the people of Beth-shemesh, it seems reasonable to view the two questions as rhetorical. It is also clear that the only satisfying answer to either of them is: “Nobody knows.” The Elides, the Israelites and the Philistines are all equally conflicted in their relationship with the ark. (Polzin 1989: 55-56). The narrative evinces an ambivalence on the part of the Israelites and the Philistines toward the ark that manifests itself in the capacity of the ark to elicit both celebration and dread among those who (wish to) possess it. (Polzin 1989: 65). The Philistines conversation occasioned by the arrival of the ark at Aphek and in their response to the disaster of the ark’s presence in Philistia introduce a dialogical (not Polzin’s term) component to the narrative that offers a salutary warning against the simplistic acceptance of any given point of view (Polzin 1989: 50-60). Polzin further suggests that the appropriateness of the use of the ark to introduce the story of Israel’s kingship is made possible because the ark is able to represent the presence of YHWH within Israel, and Israel itself (Polzin 1989: 66). Israel is defined by YHWH present within the community, and the ark as the tangible symbol of his presence.

*Barbara Green:*

More recently, in her work *How Are The Mighty Fallen: A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel*, Barbara Green, reading the ark through the lens of Bakhtin’s chronotope offers as a thesis: “that the representation of the ark in 1 Sam. 4-7, its narrative circling from Ebenezer (4.1)

to Ebenezer (7.12), makes a map of misuse, demonstrates in a series of essays the incapacity of dynastic leadership to shepherd well the relationship between God and Israel that the ark embodies. This primary picture is shaped in several ways.”(Green 2003: 131) Through the use of stock scenarios: “arrival of the ark to rejoicing, ensuing disaster, crisis colloquy, departure of the ark”, the reader is introduced to the “expectations both sides have of the ark, their handling of it, their dismay at it, their efforts to placate it... This series of constructions of the ark by all involved, characters but perhaps readers included, are substantially inadequate in one way or another.” (Green 2003: 133)

Avoiding an unduly constraining taxonomy, Green reaches eight conclusions regarding the role of the ark in the narrative through a close reading that isolates the chronotopic dynamics at work. The first of these is the cyclical nature of the narrative unit itself. The story cycles through from a battle at Ebenezer (4.1) which has disastrous consequences through to a second battle at Ebenezer (7.12) where victory is secured by the intervention of Samuel. (Green 2003: 133). Whether or not the ark and its (mis)handling has any bearing on these results is never specified in the narrative.

Second, the narrative exploits a small number of “chronotopic scenarios” within the events of 1 Sam. 4.3-7.2 – arrival, disaster, colloquy, departure (return). Among this limited set is (third):

a primary chronotope of away and back (spatial), proleptically and analeptically (temporal). That is, the action leaves the land and returns, and the time shoots ahead to account for 20 years in the future, and bounces back from there to resume 'ordinary time'. The exilic flavour is difficult to miss, especially with the narrator's reference to plagues (chs. 5-6) and the foreigners' chatter about the ark-deity's reputation (4.7; 6.6). This is a story about Egypt and also about Babylon, born out of normal geographical accuracy and chronological sequence for some reason”(Green 2003: 133).

The ark itself (fourth) is a chronotope marking the spatial and temporal indices of Yahweh's relationship with Israel. This bond is symbolized in the putative contents of the ark, the tablets of the covenant, or the book of the law, and the relics of Yahweh's miraculous provision for Israel in the wilderness. (Green 2003: 134) In keeping with the parabolic nature of the narrative, the failure of each of the main “characters” to appreciate the real nature of the ark (relationship) leads to devastating consequences. The misuse of the ark suggests a rift between

the covenant parties, such that the “ark is endangered, taken captive and returned, to rest uneasily in isolation.” (Green 2003: 134)

Fifth, matters of leadership, how it is transported or directed, the “cargo” it bears, and where it stops, appear to play a determinative role in how the ark fares. This leadership, borne by anonymous characters among both the Israelites and the Philistine, is witnessed to in direct discourse, much of which reveals the extent of how the ark is being misunderstood. (Green 2003: 134) sixth, through the compiling of these anonymous voices, the reader is permitted to see the ark from a variety of perspectives, again, usually wrong. (Green 2003: 134) As each “solution” to the problem of the ark is articulated, acted upon, and fails, the reader is drawn further into the “riddle” of relationship with YHWH. The chronotope of falling (seventh) appears in several crucial scenes, a chronotope that Green links to the narratives commentary on the request for a king.

Finally, each of the main characters in the story fail to greater or lesser degrees to successfully negotiate the relationship with YHWH. The Elides and the Philistines failures are readily apparent, if borne out of different misunderstandings. Less apparent, but still indicated in the text is Samuel’s failure to be designated as the one who will care for the relationship. In the end it is a named but anonymous priest who will take temporary custodianship of the ark .

Green’s use of Polzin as a provocative interlocutor in her bakhtinian analysis of 1 Samuel allows us to observe their common understanding of the ark as something more than “its most obvious self“ (Green 2003: 128). Where Polzin loosely identifies this function as the representation of God’s presence in Israel and Israel itself, Green specifies the ark as representing the tensions and cohesions of Israel’s relationship with YHWH.

My aim in the remainder of this paper is modest. In narrative terms, how does the ark move beyond its obvious self and come to carry the weight of the YHWH/Israel relationship? What is it about the ark, as opposed say to the tabernacle, or the that allows it to function as a chronotopic *abyme*.<sup>1</sup> Or, how does the ark, an object that can hardly be called a topos by any standard, become a chronotope which is always more than a topos? In order to answer these

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<sup>1</sup> I am picking up on Green’s discussion of Dallenbach’s treatment of the *mise-en-abysme* genre, but using it differently (green 2003: 144). It seems to me that the ark is very much like the heraldic device in the middle of the shield, an icon emblem of the story of the covenant relationship.

questions, I want to consider the work of Gaston Bachelard on the poetics of space, and from his observations suggest a narrative based model for understanding the ark's transformation from object to topos to chronotope.

*Bachelard and the Poetics of Space:*

Bachelard proposes a phenomenological approach to the study of images of intimacy because the dynamics of the image do not allow for too objective a stance. This phenomenology of the imagination seeks to answer the question “How can an image, at times very unusual, appear to be a concentration of the entire psyche? How—with no preparation—can this singular, short-lived event constituted by the appearance of an unusual poetic image, react on other minds and in other hearts, despite all barriers of common sense, all the disciplined schools of thought, content in their immobility?” (Bachelard 1994: xviii) Bachelard refers to this phenomenon as the “transsubjectivity” of the image. (Bachelard 1994: xix) Poetic images are essentially variational, unlike concepts, which are constitutive (Bachelard 1994: xix) An image is not an object and even less a substitute for an object, in poetic terms it is a specific reality. (Bachelard 1994: xix)

Bachelard coins the phrase “the phenomenological doublet,” to articulate the resonances and repercussions of a poetic image, where the resonances are related to how we hear the poem (image) and the repercussions to how we speak the poem (image), make it our own, assimilate the poet's voice. “it is as though the poet's being were our being” (Bachelard 1994: xxii). Writing about the phenomenology of this repercussion Bachelard comments: “Needless to say, the reverberation, in spite of its derivative name, has a simple phenomenological nature in the domain of the poetic imagination. For it involves bringing about a veritable awakening of poetic creation, even in the soul of the reader, through the reverberations of a single poetic image. By its novelty, a poetic image sets in motion an entire linguistic mechanism. The poetic image places us at the origin of the speaking being ... After the original reverberation we are able to experience resonances, sentimental repercussions, reminders of our past (Bachelard 1994: xxiii). As an icon of Israel's experience with YHWH, the ark acts on the imagination of the reader much like Bachelard's poetic images. Through the resonance-repercussion doublet, the ark enters into the consciousness of the reader stirring depths of memory and creating ripples of expectation.

It is important to distinguish between what I am suggesting on the analogy of Bachelard's phenomenology and what Bachelard is, himself, doing. The poetic image in Bachelard's view awakens in the reader of a poem the sense that they themselves have created the poetic image. This sense of creativity is brought about by the profound impact that the image stirs up through its resonances across the planes of the reader's personal life and the generative repercussions of these resonances within the subconscious and conscious imagination. "the image has touched the

depths before it has stirred the surface...The image offered us by reading the poem now really becomes our own. It takes root in us. It has been given us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it, that we should have created it." (Bachelard 1994: xxiii)

I am suggesting something far more modest for the ark. The poetics of narrative makes allowances for certain characters to possess qualities that create a kind of resonance/repercussion doublet when they appear in the story. This is an aspect of character, episode, or setting that is exploited by intertextuality. One of the criteria that guides the selection and arrangement of episodes in a tendentious narrative such as is found in the ark episodes in 1 Samuel is the potential of the "events" or the "existents" in the episode to manipulate the resonance/repercussion effect to maximum advantage.

Bachelard's discussion of drawers, chests and wardrobes is particularly illuminating for understanding how this resonance/repercussion dynamic activates the ark as an image possessed of transsubjectivity and hence susceptible to being deployed as a chronotope. of the development of the ark as a chronotope. He writes: "Wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms are veritable organs of the secret psychological life." (Bachelard 1994: 78) They are models of intimacy. They are also models of propriety and orderliness. "To put just anything, just any way, in just any piece of furniture, is the mark of unusual weakness in the function of inhabiting." (Bachelard 1994: 78-9). The idea that the wardrobe suggests the ordering of life goes beyond the simple notion that things are placed in the wardrobe in an orderly fashion. Indeed, the very things that are placed in the wardrobe carry the memories of a life lived, celebrations enjoyed, love consummated in the sheets now so neatly arranged on the wardrobe shelves. "A wardrobe is filled with the mute tumult of memories" (Milosz, *Amoureuse initiation*, [Quoted in Bachelard 1994:79])

The ark is just so filled with the mute tumult of Israel's memories. We must always be careful in this matter to distinguish between the ark as it appears in the narrative, and the ark as it appears in the pre-history of the narrative. It appears at times to be impossible to ignore the complex issues that accompany the study of the prehistory of the Old Testament ark texts. And yet that is precisely what we must do if we are going to appreciate the narrative import of the received textual tradition.

*The ark in the Torah and The Former Prophets:*

The following brief survey of the passages in which the ark appears is consciously limited in at least three ways. First, I have made no attempt at producing an exhaustive accounting for the ark in the Bible. This survey has been limited to the Torah and the Former Prophets. Secondly, while it is possible to speculate on a variety of alternate expressions and synonyms for the ark, the following survey is limited to the texts that use the word 'aron. Additionally, this survey makes no attempt to account for the myriad of textual and historical questions that have been raised regarding the ark and the texts in which it is most frequently found. Instead, this survey is a modest attempt at a left-to-right reading of the biblical text as it exists now paying attention to where we encounter the ark, what the text says about the ark, and what is happening to the ark, around the ark, and to the people who encounter the ark.

*Exodus*

All references to the ark in the book of Exodus are found in one of two contexts. The first of these is the series of speeches by Moses in which he outlines the plans revealed by God on Mt. Sinai for the building of the tabernacle and its appurtenances (chs. 25-30). In these speeches reference is made to the ark in terms of its design (25.10-16[22]). As well, the ark is used as a point of reference for the layout of the tabernacle and its furniture (30.6) and the rituals associated with the tabernacle (30.26). The second context in which the ark is mentioned is the report of the actual construction of the tabernacle and its fixtures (37.1-5[9]).

An important indication of the function of the ark is comes when God instructs Moses: "You shall place the lid on top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. I will meet with you there, and speak to you from above the lid, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, all my commands for the sons of Israel" (25.21-

22). Here the ark and its cover are portrayed as a nexus of the divine/human encounter. It is from above the cherubim on the ark that YHWH will deliver his covenant stipulations to the prophetic mediator, Moses.

### *Leviticus*

The single reference to the ark in Leviticus (16.2) focuses on the connection between the ark and its covering with the cherubim and the role of these objects in the rituals of the Day of Atonement.

### *Numbers*

References to the ark in the book of Numbers are varied. First there is responsibility of the Kohathites for the ark and the furniture in the tabernacle when the Israelites are on the move (3.31; 4.5). Certain themes that recur in later narratives are first introduced here. Specifically, the injunction against placing the ark on an ox drawn cart (4.5). The role of oxen and carts in the adventures of the ark is particularly pronounced in the narratives of 1 and 2 Samuel.

There is also a liturgical formula that is connected with the movement of the ark (10.35-36). As the ark set out to lead the people on the next stage of their journey, Moses would call upon YHWH to arise and scatter his enemies, and as the ark came to rest, Moses would call upon YHWH to return to the “ten thousand thousands of Israel”. While the text of Numbers makes it clear that this was an event that was repeated many times over, there is no account in the whole narrative complex of the wilderness wanderings where this action is specifically described.

### *Deuteronomy*

Deuteronomy introduces a perspective on the ark that is at odds with the portrayal in Exodus – Numbers. Most notable is the description of the ark as a simple wooden box, made by Moses himself as a repository for the tablets of the covenant (10.1-5). The ark’s lack of adornment, a striking contrast to the ark described by the book of Exodus, goes beyond the absence of the gold overlay and cornice. There is no mention at all in Deuteronomy of the cherubim covering, nor is there any indication that the ark, even without the cherubim, was intended to be the designated place for YHWH to proclaim his wishes for the people to Moses.

### *Joshua*

Joshua 3-4 contains the first sustained narrative in which the ark plays a central rôle. The story of the crossing of the Jordan river is a confused narrative even when read in English translation. It can, however, easily be reduced to its basic scenes. The people come to the Jordan and after a rest of three days prepare to cross the river. With the ark leading the way the people move out. When the feet of the priests who are carrying the ark touch the water of the river, the flow of the river is stopped up and the people are able to cross on dry land. In the process of crossing, twelve representatives, one from each tribe, collect a stone from the middle of the river, from the spot where the priests carrying the ark are standing. Exactly what Joshua does with the stones is particularly unclear. According to 4.9 Joshua sets the stones up in the middle of the river, in the spot where the priests are standing. According to 4.8 & 20 the stones are carried to the Israelite camp on the far side of the river and set up there. In both instances, however, it is clear that the stones serve as a memorial for future generations, though 4.8 and 4.20 offer different explanations of the nature of the memorial. The one focuses on the stones in relation to the Ark of the Covenant, "...you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of YHWH" (4.8-9), and the other on the connection between the miracle of crossing the Jordan and the miracle of crossing the Red Sea (4.20).

In the story of the destruction of Jericho, (ch. 6), the ark fills a similar rôle to the one that it had in the crossing of the Jordan. The ark is borne in procession by the priests as the Israelites march in silence around the city of Jericho for seven days, once a day for six days, and seven times on the seventh day. And finally, the ark is present when the Israelites ratify the covenant with Joshua at Ebal and Gerezim (8.33).

### *Judges*

The account of the outrage at Gibeah (chs. 19-21) provides an interesting context for another appearance of the ark in the Former Prophets. The last previous mention of the ark locates it in the vicinity of Shechem (Josh. 8.33). Whether this is a temporary location, limited to the period during which the covenant renewal ceremony was carried out or a more permanent arrangement is not addressed in the text. In Jud. 20.1 the text states that the people gathered before YHWH at Mizpah in order to ponder what their response will be to the gruesome summons that has been issued by the Levite. Given examples such as Lev. 16.1-2, where the sin

of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10.1-2) in coming “before YHWH” is connected with coming into the holiest place before the ark, and 2 Sam 6.4-5, where David and his companions’ exuberant celebration at the head of the ark procession is characterized as “dancing before YHWH”, it is reasonable to see in the expression “before YHWH” a common synonym for “before the ark” (Seow 1992: 387); Woustra 1975: 118). Thus it would appear that the ark has made yet another move from Shechem to Mizpah, though this is not stated in so many words.

The Israelites proceed to engage the Benjaminites in battle and are defeated twice in quick succession. The text then informs us that “all of the sons of Israel went up along with all of the people and they came to Bethel and they wept and sat there before YHWH...and they inquired of YHWH as the ark of the covenant of God was there in those days”. Here the nature of the relationship between the phrase “before YHWH” and the ark is more clearly spelled out. More interesting, however, is the apparent fact that the ark has moved once again, this time from Mizpah to Bethel.

As a result of their inquiry, the Israelites are able to formulate a cunning plan and defeat the Benjaminites.

### *Samuel*

The fullest narrative treatment of the ark in the Hebrew Bible, of course, is found in the books of Samuel. The limits of this presentation prevent me from offering anything more than a cursory treatment of these narratives. Most of the references to the ark in 1 Samuel are connected with the loss of the ark to the Philistines during the first battle of Ebenezer, its subsequent adventures in the cities of the Philistines, and its eventual return to the territory of Israel, a story that has come to be known as the *Ark Narrative*. This story is narrated in 1 Samuel 4-6 and it consists of three acts. In the first act, the Israelites experience defeat at the hands of the Philistines and send to Shiloh for the ark on the assumption that bringing the ark will remind YHWH of his covenant obligation to fight on behalf of his people. The coming of the ark is celebrated by the Israelites and inspires both terror and courage in the camp of the Philistines. However, in a stunning upset, the Philistines again defeat the Israelites, the son’s of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, who had accompanied the ark from Shiloh, are killed in the battle, and the ark is taken into captivity as the spoils of war. The first episode ends with the ark’s loss being reported in Shiloh and the subsequent death of Eli.

In the act episode, the ark is taken to the cities of the Philistines where it proceeds to wreak havoc. In Ashdod, the ark reduces the statue of the Philistine god, Dagon to a headless and handless image. Injury is added to insult when YHWH inflicts a plague of tumours on the inhabitants of Ashdod. The ark is moved on to Gath, where the plague breaks out among the inhabitants of the city. By the time the ark reaches Ekron, the Philistines have wised up to the connection between the ark and their troubles and so they consult the priests and diviners for a solution to the trouble. The third act begins with the Philistine diviners recommending that the ark be returned to its own land along with an offering for YHWH. The ark is set upon an ox drawn cart and miraculously makes its way back to Beth-Shemesh. It is welcomed by the people who proceed to use the wood of the cart offer up the ox as a sacrifice to YHWH. Some of the inhabitants of Beth-Shemesh violate the ark's sanctity/offend YHWH and 70,000 of them are killed. As a result, the ark is moved from Beth-Shemesh to Kiriath-jearim where the ark is entrusted to Eleazar, son of Abinadab. The story ends by noting that the ark remained in Kiriath-jearim for twenty-years.

There are two other references to the ark in 1 Samuel that are not a part of the larger ark narrative. The first of these is found in 1 Sam 3:3 where the scene is set for Samuel's prophetic calling with the words: "...and Samuel was lying down in the temple of YHWH, where the ark of God was." The last occurrence of the ark in 1 Samuel is in 14.18 where Saul asks for the ark to be brought to him so that he can consult YHWH. This particular reference to the ark is unusually problematic as it suggests that the ark was available to Saul at a time when the earlier narrative of 1 Samuel 4-6 and the later narrative of 2 Samuel 6 suggest that the ark was out of circulation from the time it returned from Philistia until David restored to Israel and installed it in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

2 Samuel 6 takes up the story of the ark where it from where the ark was left in 1 Samuel 7. Having secured his kingdom, David sets out to bring the ark from Kiriath-jearim to Jerusalem. This narrative episode has many features in common with the third episode of the ark narrative in 1 Samuel 6. David places the ark on an ox drawn cart, the people lead the ark in a joyous procession of celebration, Uzzah violates the ark's sanctity and is struck down by

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<sup>2</sup> There is also the problem that the LXX has *ephod* where the MT has *'aron*. Many translators and commentators prefer the LXX's reading because it fits the story as well as harmonizing with several other references to the ephod that occur between 1 Samuel 6 and 2 Samuel 6. P. R. Davies. "Ark or Ephod in I Sam XIV. 18" *JTS* 26 (1975) pp. 82-87.

YHWH, and David, in fear, sends the ark to a private house, this time the house of Obed-edom the Gittite for safe keeping. After three months, during which Obed-edom prospers, David again sets out to bring the ark to Jerusalem. This time, David has the ark carried by people instead of being carried on a cart, and he offers sacrifices all along the route of the procession until the ark comes to Jerusalem and is safely housed in a tent that which David has set up for it.

There are three other contexts in which the ark is mentioned in 2 Samuel. The first introduces YHWH's covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7. David voices his desire to build a house for YHWH. He says to Nathan: "Here I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God remains in a tent." This statement by David sets in motion a prophetic word from YHWH granting an eternal covenant with David and his descendants. The second of these three references to the ark is made by Uriah, who gives as his reason for not going home to his wife, Bathsheba, that to do so would be an act of disloyalty while the ark and Israel and Judah are in booths and Joab and David's servants are in the field. The ark makes its final appearance in 2 Samuel when David is forced flee Jerusalem during Absalom's attempted coup (15. 24-29). When Zadok and the Levites bring the ark out of Jerusalem to follow David into exile, David commands them to return the ark Jerusalem, he will depend on the favour of YHWH to determine if he will see the ark again.

### *Kings*

The ark is found in several verses in 1 Kings. In 2:26, Solomon spares the life of the treacherous priest, Abiathar, because he carried the ark before David. In 3:15, Solomon offers sacrifices before the ark after God grants to him his request for wisdom. The remaining references to the ark in 1 Kings are all related to the building of the temple and the placing of the ark within the innermost part of the sanctuary (ch. 8). These are the last references to the ark in the Former Prophets. The ark simply disappears.

### *Resonances of the Exodus in 1 Samuel:*

Returning to the narrative 1 Samuel 4-6 I would like to illustrate how just one of these historical associations finds expression in the text, the Exodus/Sinai motif. Evidence of this motif is scattered throughout the various speeches and dialogues of the narrative.

The first evidence consists in the ubiquitous covenant language scattered throughout the narrative. "Ark of the covenant," YHWH, even the language of "standing before" YHWH all

invoke a prevailing sense of covenant. (Eslinger 1985: 225, 454)<sup>3</sup> Lyle Eslinger, in his book *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1-12* suggests that the elders' purpose in bringing the ark from Shiloh is to remind YHWH of his covenant obligations (Eslinger 1989: 166). The elders' question, "Why has YHWH smitten us today?" (v. 4) presupposes that YHWH has already been involved in the battle. Thus the summoning of the ark is not to be viewed as some kind invocation of YHWH's presence. Nor is it represented in the text as following from the assumption that the presence of the ark will induce YHWH to fight for Israel (Campbell 1973: 36). The issue here is that YHWH is present and he has acted in a way that runs counter to the people's expectation. This expectation of the people is, in turn, built upon the foundation of a presumptuous understanding of the covenant relationship and obligations. It is this covenant obligation that the presence of the ark will invoke. The ark is a plea for YHWH to act as the people believe he is obligated to act.

Eslinger gives no specific indication of how he thinks the ark invokes the idea of covenant obligation. However, borrowing from Michael Fishbane's work on the "Exodus" motif as a paradigm of historical renewal, I think that the connection between the ark and covenant obligation may be seen by putting the ark in its "original"<sup>4</sup> context, that of Mt Sinai, the making of the covenant between YHWH and Israel, and the gift of the Tabernacle as a symbol of YHWH's abiding presence in the midst of his people (Fishbane 1979: 121-140). Fishbane begins by identifying the narrative of the Exodus 1-15 as "the consummate expression of divine power and national redemption" in the Hebrew Bible, and as a "*mythos* of Israelite religious consciousness and nationhood." As such it was used a "paradigmatic teaching for present and future generations" (Fishbane 1979: 121). Drawing on examples from Joshua, Micah, Isaiah, Amos, Ezekiel, and the Psalms, Fishbane demonstrates that the "capacity of the exodus paradigm to elicit memory and expectation, recollection and anticipation, discloses once again its deep embeddedness as a fundamental structure of the biblical historical imagination" (Fishbane 1979: 140).

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of the use of "*to stand before*" as a covenant formula are cited from Deut. 4:9-14; 29:14; Ezra 9:15, and 2 Chron. 29:10ff.

<sup>4</sup> I use original here only in the sense that the Exodus stories tell the story of how Israel came to have the ark in the first place.

I believe that this model of paradigmatic teaching in the Exodus can be extended to other foundational events in the story of Israel's past. I would suggest that the experience of Israel in its encounter with YHWH at Mt. Sinai is a "mythos of religious consciousness and nationhood" on a par with the exodus experience. Coming as it does as the literary, geographical and theological mid-point of the Pentateuch, the narratives concerning Mt. Sinai draw attention to themselves and to their significance. With all the resonances of covenantal time and sacred space that are associated with Sinai (demarcation of zones of access, establishment of cultic calendar, building of the tabernacle) and the way in which the narrative comes to a grinding halt at the foot of the mountain, all suggest that this is a narrative rich in significance for the discussion of sacred time and space in biblical narrative. The appearance of the ark for the first time in that context provides the means where by the ark can carry the essence of the Sinai event to other narrative contexts and hence function as a chronotopic motif.

While much transpires on or in the environs of the mountain, I want briefly to draw attention to two aspects of this experience. The first of these is YHWH's statements concerning the making and keeping of a covenant with Israel (Ex 19.5; 24.7.8; 34.27). The making of the covenant between YHWH and Israel at Mt. Sinai is an event of constitutional proportions. It is within the parameters of this covenant that the conditions upon which Israel's relationship with YHWH will be able to continue are normalized.

The second is the prominence of the ark in the instructions for the building of the tabernacle. Most importantly is that the instructions for the building of the ark are the first to be given after the report of the offering. As well, the designation most frequently given to the ark in this text is "the ark of the covenant", a name that draws attention to its connectedness to the relationship that has just been established at Sinai. Finally, the last instruction given concerning the ark and its cherubim covering includes an important statement of purpose:

You shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark; and in the ark you shall put the covenant that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the Ark of the Covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites. (Ex 25.21-22)

The function of the ark as the place from which YHWH will deliver the terms by which the covenant relationship will be maintained is clearly spelled out in this text. YHWH's words

here remind us of the repeated themes of obeying YHWH's voice and the steadfast love and faithfulness from YHWH for those who keep his commandments that we frequently encounter in the Sinai narratives.

This particular aspect of the ark's function, the place from which YHWH exercises his covenant rule, also finds its expression in the Samuel narratives. When, at the crucial moment in the first battle of Ebenezer, the ark is brought from Shiloh to the war camp of the Israelites, the ark is described in the same terms as those used in Exodus 25.

So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the YHWH of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim (14.4).

This narrative intrusion is particularly striking as it offers a characterization of the ark that differs significantly from the way in which the Israelites have talked about the ark in the preceding verses. Such obvious "play" within the narrative draws attention to those aspects of the ark that are invoked by the reference to YHWH enthroned on the cherubim, resonances, I would suggest, of the covenant at Mt. Sinai that are associated with this particular designation for the ark.

References to the Exodus/Sinai theme are not limited to the Israelite perspective either. When confronted with the news that the Israelites have brought the ark into their war camp, the Philistines respond by invoking a memory of the plagues of Egypt.

Who can deliver us from the power of these mighty gods? These are the gods who struck the Egyptians with every sort of plague in the wilderness (4.8).

Later, when the ark begins to make its presence felt in the Philistine cities, the people of Ekron refuse to let the ark come into the city, citing its deathly potential as their grounds.

Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people (5.10).

Here are echoes of the plague narratives from Exodus, where the final compulsion for Pharaoh to let Moses and the Israelites go comes in the form of a death dealing blow against all the first born in the land.

Again, during the ark's sojourn in Philistia, plagues are visited upon the inhabitants of the land. When the Philistine sorcerers are asked to divine the meaning of the plague and to

recommend an appropriate course of action, they too point us in the direction of the Exodus story:

Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After he had made fools of them, did they not let the people go, and they departed? . . . Take the ark of the YHWH...send it off and let it go its way (6.6, 8).

Other allusions to the Exodus found in 1 Samuel 6 may include the correspondence between the seven month plague in Philistia (6.1) and the seven day duration of the first plague against the Egyptians. More plausible is the connection between the despoiling of the Egyptians and the gifts of gold that are sent along with the ark on its return journey to the regions of Israel. Although the narrative only describes the plague of tumours, the instructions of the priests and diviners include references to a plague of rodents (6:5). The priests refer to the mice as destroyers, using the same hiphil participle, that is used to describe the angel of death who kills the first-born of Egypt in the Passover (Ex. 12.23). In addition, there are the references to the Philistines “sending something away and letting it go”, language that is strongly reminiscent of Pharaoh’s vocabulary in Exodus. And, finally, both the Exodus account and 1 Samuel 6 attribute the occurrence plagues and judgements to “the hand of YHWH. (Klein 1983: 60-61)

### *Conclusion:*

This preliminary and cursory survey of the narrative presence of the ark in the Hebrew Bible, and more specifically, evidence pointing to the Exodus and the covenant in 1 Samuel 4-6 suggests that it is possible to discern a motif in the Ark Narrative that centres on the ark and which points back to the great formative events in Israel’s history. The ark moves through narrative space. The ark makes its appearance at various places in the narrative. These narratives in which the ark appears occupy seams or transitions in the larger narrative structure. They are, in fact the seams that mark out the main chronological points of reference in the story. Among them are: The making of the covenant at Sinai (Exodus 25ff), the departure from Sinai (Numbers 10), crossing the Jordan (Joshua 3), Renewing the Covenant at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Shechem, Joshua 8), beginning of the transition from judgeship to monarchy (Judges 20); choosing of a king (1 Samuel 4-6); establishment of Jerusalem as Davidic city (2 Samuel 6), the election of David’s dynasty (2 Samuel 7), and finally the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem, into which the ark simply disappears. Bachelard’s poetics of space suggests a helpful analogy for understanding the ark’s journey from exodus to exile, from divine presence

to divine absence, and its transformation along the way into an icon of Israel's history and religious experience. It illuminates how the ark as a part of a complex web of temporal and spatial relations that emerge on Mt Sinai and disappear on Mt . Zion weaving themselves along the way through the national story is rendered as a particularly potent icon of Israel's story – Israel, the Israel/YHWH relationship, and the mythos of Israel. It is this iconic character of the ark that enables it to move its usual self in the story the writer of Samuel in the introduction to the story of kingship in Israel.

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