FEATURES
THE DANGER OF TRANSGRESSION AGAINST DIVINE PRESENCE: THE CASE OF THE ARK NARRATIVE (1 SAMUEL 4:1B-7:1; 2 SAMUEL 6)

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Introduction

The interpretation of the Ark Narrative has varied considerably with respect to its literary history and message. On the one hand, there is the focus on the history of the narrative as a self-contained and independent theological narrative. On the other, we have the focus on the narrative as part of the books of Samuel or the Deuteronomistic History. Holding the two approaches together, I focus, in this study, on the ark as a cultic object, and explore the Ark Narrative from the perspective of the use and abuse of cultic objects.

The motivation for this study comes from my longstanding interest in the question of divine presence in localized spaces and the appropriate response to this presence. This problem is recognized by many religious people. Many misuse this presence. The case of the recent misuse of sacramental objects almost like lucky charms within the Catholic Church in Africa today comes to mind. We also have some of the separated brothers and sisters who deny any value or substance to sacred objects. In the light of this there arises the need to investigate the mystery of divine presence in these objects based on the ancient biblical anti-idol polemic especially as expressed in the first commandment of the Decalogue. A question arises as to what is in the sacred object and what value there is, if any, in its veneration. With this idea in me, I quickly accepted the suggestion of Professor Gary Anderson, my dissertation director, that the Ark Narrative could provide a topic for dissertation.

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1 Mark Enemali presents digest of his Doctoral Dissertation in Hebrew Bible, presented and defended at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame Indiana, April, 2014.
Scholars have long debated the extent, unity and intention of the Ark Narrative in the Books of Samuel. One of the most recent and influential diachronic treatments of this narrative is the work of Patrick Miller and J. J. M. Roberts. My study builds on their work by, on the one hand, focusing on the light shed by the ancient Near Eastern context of the narrative. On the other hand it adds to their work by stressing the intimate bond that exists between the divinity and the ark, in order to correct their view that seems to deny the centrality of the ark in the narrative. The bond between the divinity and the ark has not received sufficient attention in most of the studies on the ark and so the full implication of the idea of divine presence in the ark has not been sufficiently appreciated. According to Miller and Roberts, the so-called Ark Narrative is an account of a defeated nation concerned with the power of its god in the wake of the loss of its sacred object. It is thoroughly a theological narrative that deals with the passing away of the old order expressed in the judgment of the house of the priest, Eli, on account of its corruption. They insist that the narrative is not intended to focus on the ark and its exploits, but on the God of Israel. This judgment is fulfilled in the death of the sons of Eli, but then the ark, the throne of the divinity, was lost in the process. In order for the event of the defeat and capture of the ark to be understood, they maintain, one must look to the issue of corruption in the house of Eli. To that extent, they insist that the narrative begins in chapter 2 of First Samuel. They see, therefore, the Deuteronomic idea of prophecy and fulfilment or the sin and punishment connection.

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3 Ibid., 69.

4 Ibid., 79.

5 Ibid., 70.
The First Book of Samuel does not describe the construction and consecration of the ark but the Book of Exodus presents this as part of the command and execution with respect to the building of the Tabernacle (see Exod 25-40). A comparison of the description of the structure and function of the ark and the nature and function of the ancient Near Eastern cultic image suggests a similar idea of an avenue of divine manifestation. This idea is compelling to me in the light of my African background where we speak of mediation and divine manifestations in concrete objects and locations. Against the interpretation of the Ark Narrative, therefore, that separates the divinity from the ark or fails to treat the ark as an abode for the real manifestation of the being of the Israelite deity, this study argues for the intimate bond between the ark and the God of Israel, and emphasizes the centrality of the ark in the narrative. It is a false dichotomy to make a strict distinction between the ark and the will of the God of Israel as Miller and Roberts do. I investigated the significance of divine presence in ancient Near Eastern cultic statues in order to pinpoint its bearing on the understanding of divine presence in the ark. The ark, as the visible representation of divine presence, is a functional equivalent of ancient Near Eastern cultic statues, and thus should be construed not just as a symbol, but as something closely interwoven with the being of the God of Israel.

The impetus for the construction of temples and the establishment of the cultus in the ancient Near East originated from the desire of the ancients to establish contact with the divinity. It satisfied the need “to bring the divine world concretely to earth, by providing the deity with a residence in the heart of human community.” The presence of the deity helped people to gain control and security in a dangerous and volatile world. The primary human-made abode of divine presence in the temple was the cult image. It could be an anthropomorphic, theriomorphic, or hybrid

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statue or a symbol of some sort like the spade of Marduk. The bond between the deity and cult image was perceived to be so strong to the extent that the presence of the image meant the presence of the deity. Even when the image departed the sacred precinct, especially during procession on festive occasions, the deity moved with it.

The cultic statue played a central role in ancient Mesopotamian religion and it was cared for through regular offerings, proper rituals by appropriate personnel, and provision of elaborate paraphernalia. This was done in order to ensure the continual presence of the divinity in it. There was a connection between the well-being of the image and that of the deity. And the way the deity treated the people corresponded to how the people treated the image. There is extensive literature on the subject. The image represented the deity in a physical way and so it was a source of blessing and curse. For the ancient Israelites, the ark, though it must be held as distinct from the cultic image, performed a similar role as the tangible manifestation of divine presence. This suggests that the ark was intimately bound to the being of the God of Israel and needed to be treated with the reverence it deserved.

One of the most powerful illustrations of this conviction in the ancient Near Eastern thought was the spoliation of the cultic statue in the context of war. Captured statues were often carried to the victorious power’s land and were thought of as in captivity until the

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7 Ibid., 140 n. 9.
8 Ibid., 140.
time of their restoration. Such events were interpreted as marking the departure of the divinity. Marduk abandons Babylon on three occasions in the so-called “Marduk Prophecy,” a reconstructed text from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I of Babylon. Marduk sojourns in the land of each conqueror: Hatti, Assyria, and Elam. The motivation for Marduk’s journeys may be uncertain, but the text makes it clear that he journeys voluntarily.

Sometime during the early first millennium B.C.E. the Poem of Erra, which also speaks of Marduk’s departure from Babylon was composed. Marduk’s statue had fallen into disrepair and Erra persuades him to leave Babylon. This text also speaks of the dramatic event that took place at Uruk around the middle of the 8th century B.C.E., the abduction of Ištar from the Eanna temple. According to Paul-Alain Beaulieu, based on a reconstruction of the most plausible version of the event from the perspective of the Urukean priestly establishment, Uruk enjoyed great happiness by the middle of the eighth century under the auspices of Ištar until the decadent king of Chaldean descent began his sacrilege in Uruk. He removed Ištar-of-Uruk from her abode in the Eanna temple and

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sent her to Babylon, in exile, and placed a foreign goddess in her position. Nebuchadnezzar II brought the Lady-of-Uruk back and expelled the foreign goddess who had lived there for two centuries.\textsuperscript{11}

The Ark in the Daily Cultic Life of Israel—Real Presence of YHWH in Israel

It is certainly difficult to ascertain with exactitude the function of the ark in the daily cultic life of the Israelites. The text is to a large extent silent about this issue. There is an insistence in some passages, however, that YHWH dwells above the ark and at some point the ark could be seen as a footstool\textsuperscript{12} or a throne. This is seen in such descriptions as in the phrase yōšē hakkərû-im (see 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; 1 Chron 13:16; Ps 80:2; Isa 37:16; cf. Ps 99:1) or the Priestly description in Exod 25:22:

\begin{verbatim}
wayôw'â-ti la-â šâm wô-ibbarî 'ittô-â mē'al hakkappô-re
mibbên šô'né hakkəru-im 'âšer 'al 'aron hā'ê-u-ê kāl
'âšer 'â-awweh 'ôwô-â 'êl bô'nê yiśrâ'êl.
\end{verbatim}

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.

Or Num 7:89:


\textsuperscript{12} See Ps 99:5; 132:7; 1 Chron 28:2.
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When Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the Lord, he would hear the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the Ark of the Covenant from between the two cherubim; thus it spoke to him.

The presence of YHWH fills the Tabernacle so that the ark and all other pieces of furniture become holy. The ark was carried in procession by the Israelites in the crossing of the Jordan, in the conquest of Jericho, in the transfer of the ark to Jerusalem under David, and into the temple of Solomon. The ark played a central role in these events as a representation of YHWH’s presence.\(^\text{13}\)

It appears that the ark was not just a symbol but it embodied the real presence of the God of Israel. This understanding emanates from the comparison of the biblical text with the ancient Near Eastern narratives of the use and abuse of sacred images. Since the sacred object was believed to be intimately bound to the deity it represented, what people did to the sacred object was thus not limited to the object but was believed to affect the transcendent deity that the object represented. It is on this note that the idea of

\(^{\text{13}}\) It is important to note that though D/Dtr refers to the ark as the repository of the covenantal tablets and does not speak so much of any elaborate adornment of the ark, it does not deny the sanctity of the ark. It is likely that D/Dtr maintains the sacredness of the ark based on its ancient Near Eastern context. It was common for legal documents to be placed at the feet of the deity to stress their divine authority. Notice that Deuteronomy says the tablets were inside the box (10:1-5 but cf. 31:26) and on the tablets were written the words of the Decalogue. It is understandable that anyone looking at the carved stone (pesel) would see immediately: “I am the Lord your God.” Victor Hurowitz observes that there is a likelihood of some iconic politics in this text. In other words, the only carved stone allowed is the one bearing the Decalogue (see Victor A. Hurowitz, “What can Go Wrong with an Idol?” in Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond [Ed. Natalie N. May; Oriental Institute Seminars 8; Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2012], 259-310, 298).
God’s physical presence in the ark is considered crucial in the interpretation of the Ark Narrative. The liturgical refrain in Numbers 10:35-36 buttresses the point about the closeness of God to the ark:

wayhi binsoa' ha'aron wayyomer mosheh qumah YHWH woyapu'u u'oye'e-aa woyanusu mosan'ee-aa mippanea 36 uu'enu'oh yomar su'ah YHWH ri'ow 'alpe yisrael.

When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say:
Advance, O Lord!
May your enemies be scattered,
And may your foes flee before you!
And when it halted he would say:
Return, O Lord,
Unto the ten thousands of Israel!

Ancient Near Eastern cultic images were not just works of human hands. There existed rituals that enabled them to change from their mundane state to tangible representations of the deity. In ancient Mesopotamia these rituals were called *Mîs-pî* or *Pît-pî*, literally mouth-washing or mouth-opening. Through these rituals and ceremonies, divine images were animated in such a way that they became concrete manifestations of the divine. This divinity also extended to cultic objects through the same process of divinization. The images and cultic objects were constructed in a special workshop known in Akkadian as the *bît mummi* and were transformed from their ordinary mundane nature to tangible manifestations of divine powers through the ceremonies of mouth-washing and mouth-opening.

The presence of a god in his temple permeates the temple and its architectural parts. W. G. Lambert writes: “The aura of god in his temple could so attach itself to the temple or architectural parts of it in particular, also to the implements he used, and to the city
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which housed the temple, in such a way that these various things also become gods and received offerings as a mark of the fact.\textsuperscript{14} There is certainly a very close bond between the cult statue and the god, but it is the extension of this bond to the appurtenances dedicated to the temple that is even more striking. The way the divinity’s presence extended to the architectural parts of the temple is, in a sense, similar to the way YHWH’s presence on the cherubim above the ark sanctifies the ark. And all the items in the temple receive their holiness from the presence of YHWH that fills the temple.

\textit{The Ark and the Concept of the Divine in the Ancient Near East—Beyond Idolatry and Magic}

The concept of the ‘divine’ in the ancient Near East comprised many independent entities, which functioned in various ways as representations of ‘divine powers.’ Images and cultic objects are the same to the extent that they function as part of the conceptualization of the divine and only vary with respect to their degree of religious importance.\textsuperscript{15} Cultic object is an ambiguous term. Its ambiguity arises from the fact that it can either refer to an object worshiped or to an object used in a religious ceremony. Both senses are connected, however, since an object used in a religious context would become holy by the fact and in Sumerian texts such


holy objects were marked with the DINGIR-sign to classify them as belonging to the divine realm.\textsuperscript{16}

While the mouth-washing ritual cleansed the image of its mundane nature, the ritual of mouth-opening functioned as a way to bring the image to maturation. In incantation tablet 3, lines 70-71 we hear:

70ab This statue cannot smell incense without the ‘Opening of the Mouth’ ceremony.
71ab It cannot eat food nor drink water.\textsuperscript{17}

In other words, the ritual was needed in order to transform the image from its status as simply wood, to being a god. It is interesting, however, to point out that even though the ritual was required in order to enact the transformation, the divine origin of the image was stressed. Hence the particular wood used for the fashioning of the image was sometimes called the flesh of the gods.\textsuperscript{18} The image is, thus, born in heaven and made on earth (\textit{ina šamē ibbani ina erêtì ibbanû}). Of special interest to this discussion is the bond that exists between the deity and its statue such that whatever one does to the image is considered as being done to the deity.

\textsuperscript{16} Selz, “Holy Drum,” 168. Selz notes that the DINGIR-sign does not mean that it was necessarily read as determinative. “For a decision whether a ‘classifier’ was actually read or not, we have only the evidence of Sumerian loanwords in Akkadian (cf. St. Lieberman, \textit{Sumerian Loanwords in Old Babylonian Akkadian, HSM/HSS 22}…”). There are very few cases where a genitive construction disproves the assumption of a determinative. For instance VAT 4704 (\textit{FAOS 15/3} no. 115) 5:1: 1,6 giš-usân-mar-ka ‘66 handles for cart-whips’ shows that in this case giš is not a determinative, but an independent word (cf. M. A Powell, \textit{BSA 6}, 110).” See Selz, “Holy Drum,” 185 n. 6.

\textsuperscript{17} Cf. translation in Christopher Walker and Michael B. Dick, \textit{The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mis Pi Ritual} (SAALT vol. I; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001).

\textsuperscript{18} See the Erra Epic where \textit{mēsu}-wood is referred to as the ‘flesh of the gods.’
The close nexus that exists between the deity and the ark might suggest a tendency towards idolatry if misconstrued. That calls for a clarification of the comparison between the ark and the god image. The statue of the god that stood on the pedestal in the ancient Near Eastern temple represented the presence of the god and that presence filled the temple and all the implements in the temple and the Mesopotamian scribes wrote the name of the cultic furniture with the Dingir sign. In the priestly source YHWH sits upon the cherubim and his presence fills the temple or the tabernacle. At the same time the objects in the temple are sanctified and they become holy. This understanding needs to be accounted for even if we stress the aniconic position of the priestly source. There is a real presence of YHWH in the ark and the temple.

The central position that the ark occupies in the Ark Narrative owes to its relation to divine presence. It is the locus where the presence and power of YHWH is manifested. In the Ark Narrative we find the exaltation of the divine abode as it departs from the care of the Israelites, wreaks havoc on the Philistines and their god, and finally returns to the Israelites. This idea is central and it trumps all other concerns in the story.

At the heart of all this is the understanding that God’s presence in the cultic image cannot be manipulated or controlled, which is precisely what happens in idolatry. And the supremacy of God is established in the entire narrative. This belief fits well with other extra-biblical parallels in the ancient Near East. Even though God appears to be defeated and in exile, the Ark Narrative makes clear that he is still in control of history. The counterpart of this understanding is the exhortation to remain faithful to God. This is why the narrative, in its current position, fits well into the context of the exile and the enterprise of the Deuteronomistic historian.

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19 See the contest to rule between Baal and Yamm in KTU 1.2; Miller and Roberts, Hand of the Lord, 59; C. L. Seow, Myth, Drama, and the Politics of David’s Dance (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), 63; or Baal and Mot in KTU 1.5.11.
Sin is certainly the reason for the disastrous events narrated in 1 Sam 4. We locate the sin, on the one hand, in the corruption and judgment of the priestly family of Eli, narrated in 1 Sam 2:12-36, and on the other, in the spontaneous action of the elders of Israel to put the ark into a magical use by bringing it to battle without the appropriate consultation. The elders ask a question in 1 Sam 4:3 as to why they lost the first battle:

wayyāḇō hā‘ām ’el hammāḏāneh wayyōmārū ziqnē yišrä‘ēl lāmmāh nēḇāpānū YHWH hayyōwm īpānē pāḇēlištīm niqāḇāh ’ēlēnū miṣšilōh ’ēḇārōn bērē YHWH wāyāḇō ḥāqirbēnū wayyōšī’ēnū mikkapō ṭøyēḇēnū.

The people came to the camp and the elders of Israel asked “why has YHWH smitten us today before the Philistines? Let us take to ourselves the ark of the covenant of YHWH from Shiloh that he may come near us and save us from the hand of our enemies.”

Without seeking the right counsel from God they move on to a solution of their own upon the assumption that they had lost because YHWH had not gone with them to battle and that by merely bringing the ark to battle YHWH could be made to go in their midst to save them. They thought they could force the hand of the Lord to go with them. This approach of the elders certainly differs from the response of the Israelites to the loss in the battle against Ai in Josh 7 where through a cultic inquiry Joshua arrives at Achan, the culprit. This study has emphasized this latter understanding of a magical use of the ark, which previously had not received sufficient attention. The action is seen as a misuse of divine presence because it disregards the will of YHWH. The ark

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20 This idea and the important connection of this story with Joshua 7 were suggested to me by Professor Gary Anderson in an oral conversation.
21 Cf. Deut 1:42.
as a holy object cannot be taken like any other object. Holy objects are not treated in such ways.

**Conclusion**

The presence of God in the ark is dangerous and requires appropriate reverence. Any attempt to violate this presence attracts untold consequences. This idea, which is apparent from the comparative study of the ancient Near Eastern parallels, is crucial to the proper understanding of the Ark Narrative, a result that continually lends support to the need to take seriously, in our quest to do biblical interpretation, the study of the cultures and civilizations out of which the Bible emerged.

This study is interested in the significance of the Ark Narrative with respect to the African understanding of divine presence in concrete objects, which entails a sacramental understanding almost similar to the Catholic understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. The Ark Narrative in Samuel brings to light the ancient understanding of the ark as an embodiment of divine presence in terms of divine immanence, the type that finds expression in the priestly *Kabod* theology or the Zion-Sabaoth theology, even if the Deuteronomist appears to deemphasize it.²²

Such an understanding of a physical presence of the divinity appears to be natural to the African frame of thought. The presence of the divinity on earth is real and dangerous, as it is a source both of blessing and curse. This presence is efficacious and for that reason, amenable to manipulation or control, which is dangerous. The line between sacramental efficacy and superstition is thin since efficacy could be easily confused for magic. That is why the

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²² For an elaborate discussion of the attempt of the Deuteronomist to emphasize the *shem* theology over and against the Priestly *Kabod* theology or the Zion-Sabaoth theology, see Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: University Press, 2009), 80-108.
question of the use and abuse of sacred objects is crucial and demands care.

There is often the temptation to look for what works in one's dealings with God. The case of many religious adherents moving from one prayer house to another is an example. We also have the alarming abuse of blessed objects like holy water, anointing oil, mustard seed, etc., prescribed by so many healing ministers. It is pertinent to ask what constitutes the appropriate approach to sacred objects and why it is important to stress the sacredness of the object. This has to do with the reverence deserving to God and to the abode of God. There exists an intimate bond between the divinity and the sacred object, which accounts for its sanctity. This is to be respected and cannot be put at the service of one's selfish interest, for the attempt to do so attracts harmful consequences. The freedom and will of the divinity cannot be coerced. The appropriate response to God's apparent inactivity is continual consultation with God and the willingness to submit to God's will.