

Naked Bible Podcast Transcript

Episode 297

Exodus 25, Part 2

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Episode Summary

In Part of our discussion of Exodus 25, we focused on the nature and purposes of the Ark of the Covenant. Many scholars have noted similarities between the form and function of the Israelite Ark and other sacred objects of the ancient Near East. In this episode our focus is on the most transparent parallel, Egyptian palanquins (“sacred barks”).

Transcript

TS: Welcome to the Naked Bible Podcast, Episode 297: Exodus 25, Part 2. I’m the layman, Trey Stricklin, and he’s the scholar, Dr. Michael Heiser. Hey, Mike. How are you doing this week?

MH: Pretty good. I’m still in the Ark of the Covenant so I’m still wearing my jacket.

TS: Are you actually wearing it right now as we’re recording?

MH: I’m not, but I’ve worn it a lot. This whole jacket thing has a bit of a story. Do I even want to get into this?

TS: Yeah!

MH: I found the manufacturer that made *the* jacket for the movies. The movies have different jackets. They’re all quite similar, but there are slight differences. So I thought, man, I’ve been thinking for literally over 20 years. People are going to think I’m some kind of head case when I tell this story, but I’d been thinking about this for 20 years. I’d really like to get this jacket. But I have a habit of ruining things. So I had been afraid to get this jacket because it’s a little pricey. It’s lambskin leather (it’s not ridiculous) and I had refused to buy it. My kids and Drenna kept saying, “Buy the thing. Quit talking about it.” Twenty years! So I finally bought it. And it’s not ruined yet. I’ve had it for a couple of weeks. [laughs] It’s not ruined yet. [laughs] So I don’t know how long it’ll last, but I’m just paranoid about it.

TS: Does it actually come with... Is it a limited edition? Is there...

MH: It's not a limited edition, but they go through all the things that are on the original that this company made for Harrison Ford. And then you can pick... There are a few options, like whether you want an extra pocket on the inside. His didn't have that. It'll tell you what the original one had and what you could add to it. So it gives you a little flexibility, unless you're a zealot, like, "I want *the* jacket." I *did* get an extra pocket, so I'm not too much of a zealot, I guess. But yep, I've had it two weeks, and it's not ruined yet.

TS: That's good. Now we just need to get you the hat and the whip.

MH: Right. [laughs]

TS: I think I have a bullwhip somewhere.

MH: I have a hat in my FringePop studio, but that's pretty alien.

TS: Actually, as a kid, I had the hat and I had a bullwhip. I cracked the whip one time and it came back and hit my chin. I kid you not. Isn't that what happened to him?

MH: Yep. That's what happened to him. So did you have a scar?

TS: No, I don't have a scar, but it made me bleed, and it popped my lip. And it hurt so bad that I don't think I cracked it ever again. And then later on, before Indiana Jones 3 came out... because that's when we discovered how he got his scar, and I was like, "Yeah, that happened to me. That *can* happen."

MH: Is that... I think that is more nerdy than mine. I don't know. I just don't want to ruin it. But you're living the story. [laughs]

TS: I was just a kid. I lived out in the country, so I had had the bullwhip just as a kid, just playing. I wasn't playing Indiana Jones, necessarily. I was just playing with my bullwhip. Cracked that thing and hit my lip, and whoo! It hurt so bad. It was bleeding. I didn't touch it again because it was painful. And then I saw it in the movie, and I was like, "Yeah, that can happen. Been there, done that." But I don't have the jacket. If I had the jacket (if I were you), I would go outside and roll around or something.

MH: No, no.

TS: No?

MH: It's just freaking me out still. I just know I'm going to ruin this thing.

TS: Well that's awesome. We're glad you got the jacket. We hope it inspires this episode here. So we're ready.

5:00

MH: Alright, this is going to be Part 2 of the Ark of the Covenant. And if you listened to the last one, we talked about what the Ark was, what it did, what it didn't do. And we sort of laid a few breadcrumbs out for this episode. Specifically, I pointed out last time Egyptianisms—Egyptian sorts of things that are in the narrative that are associated with the Ark, because our subject matter for today is going to be the question of ancient Near Eastern parallels. Just like with the last episode, I'm not going to talk in this one about what happened to the Ark. That's episode 158. We're going to focus in on this one particular question. Because I'm sure... It's probably a question in the minds of a number of listeners, because you run into this situation where, "There can't be laws similar in the ancient world, in the Hittites and the Egyptians and the Babylonians that are similar to the laws of the Torah, because it's the Torah. And it's from God. So it has to be unique! It can't be like anything else!" Well, "Really? Why?" This is one of those. So I want you to set your mind in that mode.

I'm going to start with a theological and historicist question. If the Tabernacle, the Ark, and the other furniture in the Tabernacle conformed to or were derivative from other ancient Near Eastern objects in some way, does that render Exodus 25:9 and Exodus 25:40 incomprehensible or make those verses untrue? We read verse 9 last time. I'm just going to read it again. Exodus 25:10-22 is the Ark section of Exodus 25. But right before that in verse 9, you get this. God says to Moses, "Do all this stuff..."

⁹ ...exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the Tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

And then verse 40 says:

⁴⁰ And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

So the text is telling us that God either has given or is going to give Moses a pattern by which to create these things—to make these things. So if that's the case (God's given the pattern), and we find out that there are other ancient Near Eastern objects either similar to the Tabernacle or the Ark or some other piece of the Ark or Tabernacle's furniture, do we have a problem here? I would suggest the answer is no. We need to ask ourselves some questions. Two questions here:

1. Why would we think that the command (in verses 9 and 40) to follow the pattern rules out similarity to ancient Near Eastern objects? Why would we think that? What about the wording "make these things the way I show you" forbids similarity? Where's the coherence in that? The command doesn't say, "Make these things and make sure they're not like anything

else in the world?” Or “like anything else you’ve ever seen.” It doesn’t say that. So that’s the first question. Why would we think the command rules out similarity to other ancient Near Eastern objects?

2. Why would God care about giving Moses a pattern in the first place? Maybe similarity would serve a purpose: familiarity. Maybe God wanted a comparison made for the purpose of highlighting points of contrast as well. Is there anything wrong with God giving Moses a pattern and the pattern is like something that Moses already knows or has seen? Is there some cosmic rule against that? Is there something that forbids God from doing that? I don’t see a problem here.

So I hope it’s clear that by asking these two initial questions it helps me to telegraph how I’m going to look at this thing. Because our topic is this whole notion of there being an ancient Near Eastern antecedent to the Ark of the Covenant. And a lot of people would be troubled by that—*are* troubled by that. But I just don’t think that it’s something that we need to be troubled by.

So having asked those questions, let’s just jump in here. And by way of review (at least a little bit), last time we really just focused on, “What’s the Ark? What is it? What was it for? How did it function?” And we read a selection from the *Dictionary of the Old Testament, Pentateuch* by Dick Averbeck that summarized what the Ark was. I’m going to read a few sentences of that. Averbeck wrote:

The Ark was the most important piece of furniture in the Tabernacle. It was placed in the inner sanctum of the tent called “the most holy place.” [MH: Some translations have “Holy of Holies.”] The cover on top of the Ark was called the “the atonement seat” (*kappōret*, from the verb *kipper*, “to make atonement”) overshadowed by two gold cherubim.

We sort of have a mental picture because of the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, so that is quite familiar. Avebeck goes on, “...the Lord would “meet” with Moses” above the lid (usually translated *mercy seat* or here in Averbeck *atonement seat*). The Lord would meet with Moses there and they would have conversations and Moses would get information. So the Ark was something of an oracle at times. It was also “the depository of the two stone tablets of the law, which the Lord was about to give Moses on the mountain.” We’ve, of course, gone over that at length here in the series on Exodus. The Ark therefore was called “the Ark of the Testimony” in certain passages (*’āṣōn hā’ēdut*, Exodus 25:22; for instance) or “the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord,” (*’āṣōn bērit yhwh*, Numbers 10:33, because the tablets were the covenant documents, and these were deposited within the Ark. So that’s where the Ark gets its name.).

So that’s the brief introduction to what the Ark was. We actually summarized Averbeck and a few other quotations with a few sentences about the Ark. I might

10:00

as well just hit those real quickly.

Again, the Ark was a box made of wood, plated with gold. The lid (atonement seat or mercy seat) is just the lid. That's actually what the term means: "lid." The lid was solid gold. It was made of *acacia* wood, and we noted last time that the term *šittim* is a term that derives from Egyptian. We're going to come back to that in a moment. The Ark was associated with God's presence. Moses would meet with God there. So it had this oracular function. The Ark was a sign of Yahweh's presence. It would often be taken into battle because the Lord was with this thing in some way. However, the Ark did not contain God. We pointed this out last time. This is Hollywood and Graham Hancock mythology. There's no passage that ever says that God was in the Ark, or that God spoke from or out of the Ark. There's nothing like that. God would meet with Moses above the lid. So God is not in the Ark. The only thing the Ark contains is the tablets of the covenant. We talked last time about how the pot of manna and the rod of Aaron gets misunderstood as being inside the Ark. That's not the case. We looked at a few verses about that. Of course, 1 Kings 8:9 said specifically that the only thing in the Ark were the two tablets of stone. So just by way of summary, that's the Ark of the Covenant.

Now I mentioned an article in Part 1 of Exodus 25. It was by Scott Noegel. You can access this online: *The Egyptian Origin of the Ark of the Covenant*. So right away in the title, Noegel is telegraphing the fact that he thinks that the Ark of the Covenant came from Egypt in some way. And that article is from a book called *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective*. Springer is the publisher, 2015. It's quite a good book. I have this. It's a major scholarly work with an assortment of essays about the Exodus. So this is one of those. And Noegel in this article, early on, if you're reading it, he notes the acacia wood thing, the Hebrew term *shittah* (Egyptian loan word), and then he adds this. So he's very upfront with where he's going in this article of course by the title and then he says this. It's in the first couple of paragraphs. He says:

Biblical texts describe the Ark of the Covenant as a sacred object containing five major features. The first is a wooden box (Heb. 'aron), roughly 4 ft. x 2.5 x 2.5, and overlaid with gold. The second is a lid (Heb. kapporeth), made entirely of gold, not plated like the box... Its third component is a pair of gold kerubim, i.e., "sphinxes," that rest on top of the lid and face each other with their wings touching...

So Noegel right away makes this assumption—this presumption—in the text of his article that the cherubim (the *kerubim*) were sphinxes, which was obviously an Egyptian thing. You might wonder how in the world... How can you make this equation? Because... If you've read *Unseen Realm*, you're going to know this. But you might also know it from other things we've done here on the podcast. Like in the Ezekiel series in Ezekiel chapters 1 and 10, there are *kerubim*. And

15:00

that's an Akkadian term. So how can you look at this Akkadian (Babylonian, if you will) term and think that we're looking at Egyptian sphinxes? You have to ask yourself, "Would the writer (whether it's Moses or not) setting the story in Egypt, if these were really Egyptian entity figures, these supernatural figures..." Using the term *kerubim*... These are supernatural throne guardians. They were supposed to be guardians of sacred space, which makes sense if they're on top of the Ark. But if you're writing this story, and you have this Egyptian context all over the place, why would you use the word *kerubim*? Because it's an Akkadian term. It doesn't feel like it makes sense. And Noegel just assumes that they're sphinxes. You have to wonder what he's thinking here.

Well, he's going to get into the subject and lay out his case for an Egyptian antecedent to the Ark of the Covenant—that the Ark of the Covenant derives from something very specifically Egyptian. Before he does that, he takes some time to debunk proposed non-Egyptian parallels to the Ark, specifically two of them. One is the Assyrian palanquin. A palanquin is like... Think of the way you see sometimes, even in modern times, like 19th century... You see important people carried in essentially a little chair suspended from poles. It's a thing that people got carried around in. That's a palanquin. So other cultures had these things. The Assyrians had them. As we're going to see, the Egyptians had them as well. They're not always styled the same. But he starts with the Assyrian model, if you will, and debunks it because it really doesn't have any of the features of the Ark of the Covenant. For instance, Assyrian palanquins had no poles to carry them. They were moved around in different methods. There was no box to it. There's no lid. It's not covered in gold. They never historically contained any relics or important texts (like documents or covenants). It literally doesn't have any real parallel, other than the fact that you could carry somebody in this thing. That's about it. So Noegel, I think, does a good job of saying, "You know, this is a proposal and it's just really not worth our time."

The second one is a Bedouin object. This is something from more either South Arabia or Assyria/Palestine/Israel/Canaan—that area—especially with the Bedouin lifestyle. It's something called... It goes by different names. The *utfa* or the *mArkab*... And right away you might think *merkava* there. It's this carrying vehicle. *utfa*, *mArkab*, or the *qubba*. If you've read Graham Hancock's book *The Sign and the Seal* (which is quite old by now—20-some years old), he tracks on the *qubba* a lot in what he writes about the Ark. But these three terms refer to an object that would be put on top of horses or camels and then people would sit in them or you would ride in them. But there's no box. There's no lid. There are no poles. You wouldn't carry important documents in them like covenant tablets or anything like that. So Noegel does a good job of saying, "This one might be a little better than the Assyrian explanation, but there are just too many disconnections here." And it's because of those disconnections and because all (and we're serious here)... *All* of the Ark's features do have some sort of parallel in Egyptian palanquins that Noegel says, "This is the best view. This is the best parallel to the Ark of the covenant."

20:00

Now Egyptian palanquins... It's kind of interesting. I was just on the East Coast for an interview in New York City. And we had a few hours on the last morning I was there. We went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And I should probably put these on the website (since they're my pictures) along with this episode. There were a few Egyptian paintings there that had palanquins in them. So I thought, "Hey, here's a good opportunity to take a few pictures, because this is what we're talking about." So the Egyptian palanquin was a box. And it could be carried by poles. Not all the models were. Typically, the Egyptian palanquin was put inside another structure, sort of like a boat or a ship—something that looked like a longboat with curled ends. And it was typically pushed or dragged along. But it could be (and some of the models were)... Like in King Tut's tomb there are pictures of palanquins with poles. There was a box with poles, just like the Ark of the Covenant (and very, very close to the actual size as well). So there were different models of this. And so Noegel argues for the Egyptian palanquin carried on these Egyptian boats that are referred to by Egyptologists as "sacred barks." And that can either be spelled "barks" or "barques"—sacred boats. So this is going to be where he argues. There are more parallels to it that we'll get into in a moment. But this is the direction he goes. I want you to see the direction he goes and why. The Assyrian view doesn't really work. There are too many disconnections. The same thing for the Bedouin *qubba*. It doesn't work. There are too many dissimilarities. And there are so many close similarities with the Egyptian model.

Now I'm going to read a few selections from Noegel as to the data upon which he draws this conclusion. So I've given you just the surface thing—Egypt had these boxes. Some of them had poles and they were carried around. But here's the real nuts and bolts from Noegel's article. I'm just skipping around in the article here. He writes:

The bark's most basic function was to transport gods and mummies. When transporting gods, the bark was fitted with a gold-plated naos [MH: that's a Greek term for an inner sanctum, like a holy place (an inner room) or a space within a space that was especially holy, especially sanctified for the carrying of the divine image, an idol in Egypt's case] containing a divine image seated on a ḥwt-block [MH: that's an Egyptian term] throne, which was veiled with a thin canopy of wood or cloth...

Many barks were decorated with protective kerubim. [MH: This is Noegel's word. *Kerubim* is not an Egyptian word.] 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 [MH: They would do this before people.] ...

The bark also gave oracles. While resting at one of the stations [MH: that it was carried around to on its journey] 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.

So here you have this box—the gold-plated box—that itself could be carried by poles. Inside of it is the deity image. But it's resting on this boat-like craft that's getting dragged through the desert. So it would stop and people would ask it questions. There's somebody probably tipping it. If it tips one way, the answer is yes. If it tips the other way, the answer is no. But they would do this. They would ask it questions. The bark was considered a source of divine knowledge, revelation being dispensed from the deity.

Some priests marched before the bark wafting incense and others alongside and behind. Some bore standards representing nomes [MH: a nome is like a county or a district in Egypt—a geographical region], much like the tribal procession of the Ark of the Covenant.

With the tribes carrying these flag standards around. They're on all sides of the Ark. So Noegel's building this picture, this case.

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]." Scholars have long likened this practice to the placing of the covenantal tablets in the Ark's footstool [MH: the Ark itself is referred to as God's footstool, and this is where the tablets went]...

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, but as a rectangular object, more akin to the riverine boat that informs the shape of Noah's Ark (6:14–16).

25:00

Now let me just stop there. This is something you're going to see a lot. You see it in Hancock as well. The word for Noah's Ark is not the Hebrew word that's used for the Ark of the Covenant. And Noegel knows that and he says it in the article, but therefore I don't know why these two things always get connected. They are not the same term. They don't have the same function. The Ark of Noah is the *tevah*. It's not the *'aron*. But you'll see this conflation all the time. So he's saying that... Just think of this. Noegel is building this case. He says, "We have a box in Egypt that was carried around by poles, inside of which was a deity. It

would function as an oracle. People would surround it and carry banners.” It sounds a lot like the Ark of the Covenant. And I’m not saying that these aren’t legit parallels. I think basically they are. But then the fact that it’s placed in a boat makes the lights go off in their heads and then their minds go to the Ark of Noah, because that was a boat. It just doesn’t seem like a legitimate connection. They’re never connected in Scripture. The words are different. The functions are different. The settings are different. Frankly, the context (one is clearly Babylonian) is different. And, in fact, Irving Finkel, who wrote a book just a few years ago about the Ark. Based upon new cuneiform information, it might have been a round object or something like that. There’s a different way to look at what the Ark of Noah might have been shaped like, different than your standard rectangle. So without getting into how you deal with that with the measurements and all that stuff... I’m not going to go down that rabbit trail. But it’s not the same object is the point. It’s not... They don’t look like each other. The functions are different—the whole thing. So I just don’t know why scholars feel compelled to make this association when there just really isn’t much of an association. Let’s just stick with the Egyptian material because that’s fairly compelling in and of itself. I don’t know why we have to go here. But anyway, Noegel continues:

Nevertheless, some of the bark’s other aspects remained meaningful in Israelite of the divine presence. It continued to be a sacred object that one could consult for oracles [MH: this happens after the days of Moses (we talked a little bit about this last time in Part 1)], and its maintenance continued to be the exclusive privilege of the priests and 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.

So there we have Noegel’s basic description. So Egypt had this box-thing plated with gold. It was sometimes covered with wood, sometimes with a tent. And Noegel draws attention to that. Well, that’s interesting, because the Israelite Ark was in a tent. Not just the Tabernacle, but the Holy of Holies was a complete tented or... It had curtains over the top and the sides. So he says, “Look at that. That’s even a parallel.” Carried with poles. You could have the deity inside and whatnot. And they would take it out publicly and so on and so forth. So all of this that he mentions here (except for the Noah’s Ark thing), honestly, he has good sourcing for. All of this is demonstrable from primary sources in Egypt.

However, Noegel goes on to argue that the Ark (the ‘*aron*’ in Hebrew) was connected to Egypt in other ways. These arguments, in my view, are much less coherent than these primary source sort of connections. For example, Noegel notes that ‘*aron*’ is a word used in Genesis 50 for the “coffins” or sarcophagi used to hold the bodies of Jacob and Joseph when they died and then when they were buried, when their deaths and burials are described. He goes on an excursus then about how burials and the cult of the dead in Egypt (the Osiris

cult) were also associated with threshing floors—something in the Hebrew Bible with which the Ark was associated. That’s true. He further makes this association (this threshing floor thing)... He goes from that and he says, “Hey remember that story about Dagon, when the Ark was put before Dagon in the temple of Dagon?” Dagon is a grain god (not a fish god, by the way). It’s true. He’s a grain deity. And so grain is associated with threshing floors. So isn’t that interesting, how the Ark winds up in the temple of Dagon, and Dagon is associated with threshing floors? And, of course, the Ark in some of the books of Samuel and Kings gets associated with threshing floors, because the threshing floor that David buys from Araunah becomes the site of the temple. So Noegel is saying, “Look, all of this is also Egyptian.”

30:00

Now I personally have my doubts about this, especially when he tries to connect this to Osiris (the cult of the dead) just because we use the same Hebrew term for *coffin* of Joseph and Jacob. This is a real stretch. How can I say that? Well, I would just ask some questions. Let’s just think about this a little bit. How would the Ark be associated with either death or resurrection? (Osiris dies and then he doesn’t physically resurrect, but he comes back to life in the underworld, and he’s the god of the underworld.) How’s the Ark associated with either death or resurrection? It isn’t. It isn’t associated with either. You would think that if there’s some sort of Osirian connection here that somewhere the Ark would get that specific theological association, but it never does.

It makes far more sense to note, as well, that threshing floors... You don’t have to say, “Well, threshing floors are interesting in the Hebrew Bible when the Ark is associated with them because of Osiris. And the Osiris cult was associated with threshing floors.” Yeah, well, okay, but it makes more sense to note that threshing floors were associated with the harvest and food production is, of course, essential to *life*. The Ark was the source of life because it was associated with the presence of Yahweh. You don’t need anything from Egypt to make those associations. Further, why would the Philistines put the Ark into the temple of Dagon? Did they really put the Ark into the temple of Dagon because they thought to themselves, “Hey, this box is Egyptian, and Egyptian palanquins sometimes show up in scenes that include grain harvests. And the cult of Osiris is associated with the grain harvest, just like Dagon. So the Ark belongs here.” Is that really what they’re thinking? A Philistine is thinking that? That’s really dubious. It’s very dubious reasoning. It’s so much more obvious that the Philistines’ storage of the Ark in Dagon’s temple is a conquest gesture. They do it because they believe Yahweh was defeated by Dagon on the field of battle, so putting the Ark in Dagon’s temple (his sacred space) is a gesture of Yahweh’s defeat and submission to Dagon. That’s why they do it. You don’t need any connection to Osiris and threshing floors associated with Osiris to make sense of the 1 Samuel 5 story. You just don’t.

Another example: Noegel notes passages that mention the Ark and threshing floors and the festival of Sukkoth (the festival of Booths or Tabernacles). This

has nothing to offer in the way of support for a connection to Egypt. The festival of Sukkoth... (Yes, it has something to do with the grain harvest. That's when it was held. Okay, we get it.) But the festival of Sukkoth commemorated Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and from other gods during the Israelite journey through the wilderness, which was, of course, viewed as the place of chaos. So you just don't need anything from Egypt to see symbolically, emblematically, what's going on in any of these examples. You just don't need Egypt. You don't need Osiris. You don't need any of this stuff. So to me, this is the weakest part of Noegel's article. He does a good job of ferreting out primary sources for the construction and shape and look and some of the functions of the Ark. That much is demonstrable. But when he goes on these rabbit trails, it's really just special pleading. Honestly, I think it's kind of poor reasoning. So I think he overstates the data in those respects. But in the other respects, I think he marshals good evidence and his case is workable. His argument is workable, just generally.

So let's think about what we've talked about to this point. Do we have... Let's just assume that Noegel... He's ferreted out this data. And let's just assume that he's right, that he's on to something, that there's this Egyptian antecedent. And by the way, we can already see the disconnects. Egyptian palanquins carried around deities—idols. Yahweh is never said to be in the Ark. Ever. Not one verse. He's always above the lid, communicating with Moses. So there are obvious disconnections. But yet the form of the Ark and the form of these Egyptian palanquins are very close.

35:00

Now, even the "sphinxes" are cherubim. You will see pictures... I don't know if any of mine... I should have looked before we got into this. It's been a little while since I took the pictures. I'm trying to remember the one I'm thinking of in Tut's tomb. There are some Egyptian palanquins that on the ends you have Isis and Nephthys. They are winged goddesses. They're not creatures like cherubim or sphinxes, but they have outstretched wings. So you could argue that even that sort of feature is there on these boxes and whatnot—the poles, the whole bit. Despite the disconnections... Let's just put it this way. There's a lot more going for this parallel than Assyrian palanquins and the Bedouin *qubba*. There's just a lot more here.

So let's just assume that we've got an Egyptian antecedent here to the Ark. It would kind of make sense, because of the setting of Moses. Moses was raised in Egypt. He's the son of Pharaoh. We know the whole story and whatnot. So the context makes sense. So we have to ask ourselves, "Do we have some scriptural or theological reason *requiring us* (that's an important term) to reject the idea that God could have instructed Moses to make an object similar to one with which he'd be familiar?" Where's the rule against that? You already know (because I started the episode with these two questions) that I don't see this as a problem, because to go back to the two questions... Why would we think the command that God gives... Let me just read it again, Exodus 25:9. Moses is

supposed to make this stuff...

...exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the Tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

Exodus 25:40:

And see that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.

So God shows him this pattern. “Here’s what I want built. Here’s how to build it.” So how is that incompatible with God deciding in the pattern he gives Moses to use objects or to give him instructions that Moses will (at least in part and maybe foundationally—maybe in significant ways) say, “Okay, I know what that looks like. I get it. I understand what you want here because I’ve seen something like that before.” Is there some cosmic rule against that—that God is not allowed to instruct Moses using something familiar to Moses? Honestly, I can’t think of a good reason why this would be a problem. I just can’t. God knows where Moses has been. He knows what Moses has seen. So why not? Where’s the rule against that? So these verses (Exodus 25:9, 40) say simply that Yahweh told Moses how to design the Ark. The passages don’t say God said he would give Moses the design for an object unlike any other. The text never says that. God never says that. So I’d argue that any trepidation over the similarities is unnecessary and, to be blunt, kind of manufactured.

So where does this put us? I think it’s pretty clear that Egyptian palanquins (these sacred barks) are likely a template for the Ark. They’re better than any other candidate. And there’s lots of specific similarities. That is, God based his design instructions to Moses on something familiar to Moses. The parallel elements are pretty transparent and there are a number of them. The Egyptian context of the Exodus and journey to Sinai are, of course, obvious. Currid... This is in his commentary. It’s not from his book *Egypt in the Old Testament*. He has a commentary on Exodus that we’ve quoted before. Currid writes this:

It is widely recognized that the design of the Ark (and the entire Tabernacle, for that matter) is distinctly Egyptian. That is not a problem, since God may have used a pattern, or model, which the Hebrews were accustomed to seeing, and making, as artisans in Egypt.

Hey, did we think of that, internet theologian who wants to somehow use the similarity to say something bad about the Bible? Did you ever consider that—that maybe some of the Israelites actually worked on these things? Huh? This is entirely conceivable. And there’s nothing in the text or in any sort of theological reason why that forbids God from doing this. So there’s no obstacle here. The

Tabernacle and the Temple in general are not completely (or even mostly) different than other ancient Near Eastern temples. They have some of the same rooms, the same layouts, the little niches. If you just look at these things, you can see that there are a lot of similarities. But there are certain aspects in which they are different—either used differently or look different or are absent in some cases. They do transmit certain theological distinctions in Israelite religion. There's no need for the design of something Israel is using (like a temple or an ark or the golden lampstand, the menorah, or the table of showbread, the bread of the presence)... There's no need for all those objects to be so 100% completely *other* than the stuff anybody else uses. What would that need be?

So an Israelite priest... Do we have to make sure that his robe is a different color than all of the other robes worn by priests in other ancient Near Eastern civilizations? Can it be the same length? Do the armholes have to be a different size? Where does this (I think) incoherent need for total otherness end? Really? Do Israelite priests and the objects they use in their worship... Why must they be totally other?

Now by definition, it doesn't matter what shape or how they look. The fact is that how they're used and the meaning of their usage and, of course, the deity that's being served by them, that's where the otherness comes in. There you need otherness. And you get it theologically, the differentiation is not transmitted... Is not like *held*... The differentiation is really important—the difference between Yahweh and these other gods. That isn't carried by the shape of things or the color of things or the design of things (objects). That is put forth and held in place by bigger ideas than what this box looks like. So I think this is a really misguided thing to be concerned about.

We mentioned last time, "What about laws?" Like the law code, the Ten Commandments. Is there some cosmic rule that says, "Everything listed in the Ten Commandments can't... None of those things can be shared by other cultures? Israel's laws have to be 100% other and different?" Why? It just doesn't make any sense. So if Israel has a law, "Thou shalt not commit murder." "I'm just so confused, because I found a command against murder in a Babylonian law code. Oh, that's trouble for the Bible." It's just ridiculous. These are absurd thoughts. Honestly, I just have to be blunt here. But you see this kind of thinking on the internet all the time. You see a law or something (in this case, an object) that bears resemblance to (either conceptually or in this case, physically) to something in the Bible... Something from this pagan culture looks like this thing from the Bible. And we get shook up by that. Why? The theology isn't held in shapes and colors and objects. It's much more transcendent than that. The issue is the content of the faith. That's what makes it different.

I want to belabor this point because I do run into this, where people are so troubled. To me, I just file this into the bucket that's labeled something like, "Stuff that troubles people that really shouldn't trouble them at all, and they're just not

thinking well about this thing.” This is another one of those. So I don't think that we have a problem here, for all of these reasons and others. I'm going to try to stop beating this dead horse here. But there's just no theological reason God couldn't use something similar to hand to Moses and say, “Hey, make that.” There's just no reason it had to be 100% other.

Now what I want to wind up with here is the question of, “What about the mix of Egyptian and Akkadian elements with respect to the Ark?” I'm specifically talking here about the cherubim. We're going to see other things in Part 3 when we go through the rest of the furniture. It's very Egyptian. There are things about the way the lampstand—the menorah—is described. It's very Egyptian. Let me just tip my hand here. You'll see on the internet and in some academic sources about how the menorah (the golden lampstand) inside the Tabernacle is the Babylonian or Akkadian tree of life. It's not. There are a number of fundamental disconnections between that and what we have in the golden lampstand.

45:00

Nevertheless, the lampstand *does* convey this tree-of-life kind of thing, but it does it in an Egyptian way. It has no history or historical or thematic connection to something Babylonish. It's very Egyptian. We'll get to that in Part 3. It conveys the same idea—the presence of life—and it actually hearkens back to creation in specific ways. The bread of the presence does that.

There are reasons why the objects are what they are. But they're all basically Egyptian except for this odd designation of these supernatural guardians of sacred space—the *kerubim*. Because it's an Akkadian term. We have all this Egyptian flavoring here in this passage, as we're going to find out next week. And right in the middle of it is an Akkadian term, *kerubim*. Like, what is going on with that? It's just odd. It is an outlier. It's the lone thing in the description that is just inconsistent.

Now if we ask, “How is this explainable?” I'm going to be honest with you. I can't prove what I'm going to say from this point on. But I do have a suspicion. So this is speculation. This isn't exegesis. I have not seen any commentators address the oddity of an Akkadian term being employed for an object so Egyptian in a narrative whose context is Egyptian. So I'm going to take a crack at this. What I'm going to say is speculative, but to me, it makes sense. It's workable. So let's assume that the two-winged creatures atop the lid of the Ark were Egyptian in character. Let's just assume that with Noegel. He calls them sphinxes. He doesn't have any textual basis for that, he just does it.

Let's just assume that that's what we're talking about—some Egyptian figure. So let's just assume that they're Egyptian in character, like basically everything else about the Ark—sphinx-like creatures that had wings. If Moses was responsible for the textual description (if Moses was the one writing this), it makes zero sense, given his Egyptian context, that he would use an Akkadian term to describe those figures. That just makes no sense at all. However, if the Torah was edited during the Babylonian period, it seems reasonable that readers of the

Hebrew Bible would not be familiar with those Egyptian figures. While it's true that Isaiah uses *srf* (*seraphim*) for its throne guardians in Isaiah 6... And that's Egyptian there. While that's true, the Israelite kings of the 8th century BC utilized Egyptian motifs because they were allies with Egypt against Assyria. This is Isaiah's time. So Isaiah is an outlier here. It's an oddity of its own. But you could see why it would happen there, because of Ahaz and Hezekiah and all this stuff.

Now the Exile was 200 years later and there was no Egyptian context to the Exile. This is Babylon. So it might make sense in the Babylonian era that a scribe, while he's working on the Torah (putting it into its final form) could have updated the terminology of the Ark construction narrative with a Babylonian term for the throne guardians so that readers would know what in the world they were. Because they're not going to be familiar with Egyptian terminology. They might have been familiar with Egyptian terminology like the *seraphim* in Isaiah's day because of the alliance with Egypt. It's kind of interesting that if you actually go through the Hebrew Bible and look up all the places where *kerubim* occur, almost all of them are late. You have Chronicles references. You've got contexts where you could make an argument that either the context of the particular passage is in the Babylonian period or (in the case of the Torah) was re-worked during the Babylonian exile. There are some exceptions (there are a handful of texts that use the term *cherubim*) that are not as late as the Babylonian period. Samuel has a couple, Kings, Isaiah 37. The rest are clearly Babylonian era or could be. But even those references in Samuel, Kings, and Isaiah 37 reflect monarchical times that are Assyrian. And Assyrian had the same word for the divine throne guardians: *kuribu* (*kerubim*).

50:00

The real outlier in all this... In other words, I can give you an argument for an Assyrian/Babylonian context for every occurrence of the word *kerubim* except for Isaiah 6. Because there we don't have *kerubim*, we have *seraphim*. That's the only place where the seraphim show up—that one passage. So that's really the outlier. You'd basically have to say that Isaiah 6 is unique (and it actually is) to make this argument work. This is speculation. All I'm doing is spit-balling here. I'm speculating that what we have here is that we had an Ark back in Moses' day and the things on top of the Ark were of such a design that they would have been Egyptianized like other things about the Ark. But eventually people would not know what those things were, or what they represented. Not everybody has a Bible—just the priestly class. And so what a scribe did was he also called them *kerubim* so that the people would know these are divine throne guardians protecting sacred space. That's pure speculation on my part. But I've not seen anyone even attempt to ask the question, "Hey we have all this Egyptian stuff going on in Exodus 25 except for what these two things are called on the lid. That's Akkadian. How does that work?" I don't know.

Now, to be a little more fair... But you have to hold the late view of the Exodus here. You could argue, even though they might have been Egyptian in form or appearance, they could have used *kerubim* because in the late period (the late

date for the Exodus), that is very close to the period of the Amarna age. And in the Amarna age there was lots of Akkadian, not only in Egypt but in Syria/Palestine (Canaan), because Akkadian was the language of international correspondence for this period. So it's conceivable that Moses would have known Egyptian. He would have known his native language (Hebrew). And he would have known Akkadian as well. That's possible. But I'm still struck by the oddity of it, because why don't we see other terms mixed in with this Egyptian stuff. It just... Why these? Maybe it's the best term. Maybe Moses... It's just the best term to describe what these things are and what they do. I don't know. That's possible. But who knows? At the end of the day, who knows?

So it's an incongruity. It's just something I wonder about. I've not seen anybody really tackle it. So I'm offering it for speculation, just because hey, it's the podcast and sometimes we just wonder about things. So that's what I'm doing. I'm wondering about this. So I don't know. I've not come across anything that makes *more* sense. So that's just something rattling around in my head that I wonder about how to resolve this incongruity.

So next time, we're going to look at the other Tabernacle furniture and we're going to see that those items are also cast in Egyptian terms and motifs, which makes the cherubim issue all the more of an outlier, because there's this Egyptian antecedent to it—the palanquin. Yes, there are differences. God isn't being carried around in a box in ancient Israelite thought. He can't be contained. There is no idol. So there are differences, but I think the Egyptian material does merit consideration, that yep, this is probably the model or part of the template for what's going on with the Ark of the Covenant. And we're going to see more Egyptian stuff in the other furniture, which makes the cherubim issue all the more odd, because of the terminology. So next time we'll look at the other Tabernacle furnishings and what their meaning was. I think you're going to find it very interesting on a conceptual level as to what these things stood for in the mind of the Israelite.

TS: Mike, my question going into this episode is about the cherubim. How did they know what they looked like? When God said to make two of them looking at each other, well, in Ezekiel, we kind of learned that they have four faces. So on the Ark, if they're facing each other, which face? There's no detail there. They didn't question it. It's like, "Okay, we'll make two cherubim looking at each other." But it's not expounded upon.

MH: Noegel would say that the only thing that could visually answer that question would be Egyptian sphinxes or the Isis/Nephtys winged women on either side of the palanquins. He would say that when they got these instructions, that's what popped into their heads because they had seen those before. Whereas in Babylon, historically, they're going to have had prior contact before they ever get into exile in Babylon... They're going to have had contact with the Phoenicians. And the Phoenician thrones are actually the best parallels to the Ezekiel throne.

55:00

But there you have the cherubim—these bovine kind of creatures with multiple faces—and they're facing different directions. Then on top they have the round, circular platform. Then on top of that, you have the throne. It's just like Ezekiel 1. So they would have known what those look like. And then when they get into Babylon, you're going to get some of the same kind of motifs. You're going to have the wings as well. Maybe not multiple faces, but they would have had... In the Ezekiel case, he just has this vision. He's not told to make them. So when you see them, you know what it is. So they would have been familiar language to the people who would have been reading his book because they would have seen at least a couple of different kinds of these things. They would have been able to intellectually, mentally, place them and identify what those were. But when it comes to this, yeah, you're right. There aren't any... Where would they have seen this? And if Noegel's sitting here, he's saying, "There's only one possibility for this. And that's something from Egypt, because that's where they were." And I think Currid is right, that maybe some Israelites even worked on some of these things as craftsmen. So that's a roundabout way of reinforcing an Egyptian context for the Ark. But that's a really good question.

TS: Well, even going back and describing them in the garden with the flaming sword...

MH: You're talking to the guy that believes Genesis 1-11 was either written or heavily edited in Babylon. So I think that's what they're thinking there because there are so many other Babylonish things, and that's just one of 20 or 30. So since I am driven to that position by all the other Babylonish things in Genesis 1-11, to me that's not a different question to answer. The conception there would match Babylonian examples. So that's where they're getting the imagery from, or at least that's how they would have parsed the imagery in light of what they're reading. That's how they would have identified it mentally.

TS: And of course, the cherubim are the ones responsible for the face-melting. [laughs]

MH: Absolutely. [laughs] You're really stuck on the face-melting. Do you have that as a screen-saver?

TS: No, but I just love... That really affected me when I was a child.

MH: Maybe I gave you an idea there.

TS: As a child of the '80s, when I saw that movie, I was so into it and it stuck with me. So I know to keep my eyes shut, and no matter what happens, don't look. [MH laughs] I learned that lesson.

MH: "Don't look at the Ark! Don't look at the Ark!" [laughs]

TS: Seriously, you'll get your face melted off. Alright, Mike. Well, we look forward to Part 3. This is an interesting one. The Ark is a big topic. Everybody likes it. I like it. It's one of my favorites. Who doesn't want to go be Indiana Jones and go look for the Ark of the Covenant?

MH: I've got the original posters, man. I don't collect anything, but I did collect those. So I get it.

TS: And the jacket.

MH: And the jacket, yes. So I get it.

TS: I bet a ton of our listeners out there get it as well. So with that, I just want to thank everybody for listening to the Naked Bible Podcast! God Bless.