

FAILURE OF A RITUAL PROCESSION (2 SAMUEL 6; 1 CHRONICLES 13) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS REGARDING THE NATURE OF GOD

ROY E. GANE

Andrews University, MICHIGAN

Abstract

The present article investigates the cause(s) and implications of a biblical instance of ritual failure: the failure of the first ritual procession by which King David attempted to bring the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. Analysis of the descriptions of this procession includes comparison and contrast with accounts or instructions regarding other ancient Near Eastern ritual processions and with the biblical descriptions of David's second successful procession. The failure of David's first procession highlighted the awesomeness of Israel's deity and the importance of strictly following his instructions.

Keywords: ritual procession, infelicitous performance, ritual failure, ark of the covenant

1. Introduction

This article contributes to the understanding of dynamics and concepts that can be involved in an infelicitous ritual performance by analyzing biblical records of a particular ritual event.¹ This case study is the failure of King

¹ An earlier version of this research titled "Failure in a Ritual Procession and Its Implications (2 Sam 6)" was presented in a Ritual in the Biblical World session at the national meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio, Texas, USA, on November 21, 2016.

David's first attempt to convey the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem through a ritual procession (2 Sam 6:1–10; paralleled in 1 Chr 13:1–13).² The procession was aborted when YHWH struck Uzza (alternative spelling "Uzzah") dead because he took hold of the ark in order to steady it on the cart that was carrying it to the city of David (2 Sam 6:6–7; cf. 1 Chr 13:9–10). Why did YHWH do this? Was only Uzza at fault, or did other aspects of the procession contribute to the tragedy? In any case, how does this ritual failure illuminate the nature of God in relation to His people?

A ritual procession is a complex religious event. Therefore, in order to clearly recognize the factors involved in David's failed procession, we will begin by reviewing some descriptions of other ritual processions in ancient Near Eastern (ANE) texts outside the Bible. Then, we will assess the descriptions of David's interrupted first procession in the narratives of 2 Sam 6:1–10 and 1 Chr 13:1–13 in relation to the other ANE processions. After that, we will examine the accounts of David's second ritual procession, which continued the journey to Jerusalem and succeeded in bringing the ark there (2 Sam 6:12–17; 1 Chr 15:2–16:1), for additional light on the reason(s) for the failure of the first procession. Finally, we will draw a conclusion regarding what the reason(s) teach(es) regarding the divine nature.

2. Ritual Processions in the Ancient Near East

2. 1 Mode of Carrying Sacred Objects

Ancient Egyptian priests carried sacred objects on poles over their shoulders in processions.³ However, other ANE peoples transported such objects on carts or wagons. For example, during the Babylonian New Year Festival of

² Cf. Ronald L. Grimes, "Ritual Criticism and Infelicitous Performances," in *Readings in Ritual Studies*, ed. Ronald L. Grimes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 279–93 for an introductory exploration of ritual failure, including types of infelicitous performance, with some other illustrations from the Hebrew Bible.

³ Egyptian "festivals always included processions during which the processional statue of the god, enclosed in a small wooden shrine and placed on a portable bark, was carried out of the sanctuary on the priests' shoulders" (Herman te Velde, "Theology, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Egypt," in *CANE*, ed. Jack M. Sasson [New York: Scribner's Sons, 1995], 3:1744). For ancient Egyptian pictures of this practice, see <http://ss69100.livejournal.com/2478092.html>; Bruce Well, "Exodus," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 1:248; and Erik Hornung, "Ancient Egyptian Religious Iconography," in *CANE*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1995), 3:1716, 1726.

Spring (Akītu Festival), probably on the date of Nisannu 9, idols of the gods were carried on magnificent wagons from Marduk's Esagila temple northward along the processional way through the Ishtar Gate to the dock, where they were transferred to barges and continued upstream on the Euphrates River to the Akītu chapel (*bīt akīti*) on the outskirts of the city of Babylon. There, they spent a couple of days before re-entering the city on Nisannu 11 in a second grand parade.⁴

Another example comes from Anatolia. On the fourth day of the Ninth Year Festival of the god Telipinu, Hittites conveyed sacred objects from the temple of Telipinu to a river in order to wash them there.⁵ The objects included idols of Telipinu, his consort, the sun god, and the weather god, as well as a cult pedestal. After the sancta were purified, they were brought back to the temple. They were transported both ways on Telipinu's carriage. Telipinu's idol, perhaps having been placed in a box, was accompanied on the carriage by a couple of his priests,⁶ one of whom held the idol in place during the journey. This box protected the idol in case the wagon would jerk.

⁴ Julye Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legitimation in Mesopotamia*, Gorgias Dissertations 2, Near Eastern Studies 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004), 93–101. Partially preserved Akkadian tablets prescribe the rituals of this festival, which was to be celebrated in Babylon during the first 11 or 12 days of the spring month of Nisannu. The tablets recording days 2–5 date to the Seleucid period, and evidence for the other days of the festival also dates from the first millennium BC (especially Neo-Babylonian). However, the procedures are rooted in much earlier Mesopotamian practice: the oldest references to *á-ki-ti* festivals in other cities date to the third millennium BC (Mark Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* [Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1993], 401, cf. 406–18). In *The Cultic Calendars*, Cohen includes translation and discussion of texts concerning at least part of each festival day (pp. 437–51). Bidmead also provides translation of some portions, as well as reconstruction of ritual activities and their social function (Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival*).

⁵ The festival activities are prescribed on partially preserved Hittite tablets that mostly date to the Late Hittite period. The Ninth Year Festival was published by Volkert Haas and Liane J.-Rost, "Das Festritual des Gottes Telipinu in Ḫanḫana und in Kašḫa. Ein Beitrag zum hethitischen Festkalender," *AoF* 11 (1984): 10–91, 204–36. An English translation appears in Roy E. Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure*, Gorgias Dissertations 14, Religion 2 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2004), 347–66, with ritual analysis of the rituals of the fourth day on pp. 245–86. There (p. 268) I briefly refer to similarity with 2 Sam 6, citing Moshe Weinfeld's "Traces of Hittite Cult in Shiloh and in Jerusalem," *Shnaton* 10 (1990): 110–14 (Hebrew), but do not develop this topic.

⁶ A second priest was with the priest mentioned in the journey to the river because later for the return journey the priest boarded the carriage along with his fellow.

2.2 Participants and Activities

Many people, including royal individuals, could participate in a ritual procession, which was a festive occasion. In the Hittite procession to the river, the carriage of the god Telipinu was accompanied by the crown prince, musicians played a harp and tambourine in front of the god, i.e., in front of the carriage, and girls sang behind the carriage.⁷ The presence of the crown prince indicates that the event was religious-political. On the way back from the river, wrestlers performed before Telipinu's image, apparently to entertain him and the gods with him.⁸ However, there is no indication that the Hittite crown prince participated in the singing, dancing, or entertainment. After the Hittite priests set the image of Telipinu back in its usual place in his temple, a large offering of meat (animal sacrifices of bovines and sheep), bread, and drinks was presented to the god.⁹

The Babylonian procession during the New Year Festival (see above) included cultic musicians, singers, and dancers.¹⁰ More importantly, however, the king of Babylon was to lead the procession of gods, represented by their idols, from the city to the Akītu chapel. Following the king and the gods, priests and other cultic functionaries marched according to their ranks, and the parade also included a special group of citizens: the people of the *kidinnu*.¹¹ Julye Bidmead points out:

The procession did more than just identify the primary participants in the ritual—rather it acted to reinforce social stratification. The king, temple staff, and privileged citizens (i.e., the elite) marched side by side with the chief god, Marduk. This visible and conspicuous representation of the social structure was emphasized annually as the procession marched through Babylon.¹²

⁷ The preserved Hittite texts do not refer to dancing.

⁸ Cf. Alfonso Archi, "Fêtes de printemps et d'automne et réintégration rituelle d'images de culte dans l'Anatolie Hittite," *UF* 5 (1973): 25–27; Gary Beckman, "The Religion of the Hittites," *BA* 52 (1989): 103.

⁹ Gane, *Ritual Dynamic Structure*, 254–60, 360.

¹⁰ Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival*, 94.

¹¹ Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival*, 94–96. In Babylon on holidays such as the New Year Festival, "at the sides of the procession road there were musicians, acrobats and wrestling contests" (Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life*, SHANE [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 21).

¹² Bidmead, *The Akītu Festival*, 96.

The historical return of the captured idol of Marduk, the city-god of Babylon, to his restored temple in Babylon at the beginning of the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Assurbanipal (see further below) was accompanied by music and rejoicing. Furthermore, Assurbanipal's army participated in this great event, during which the Assyrians offered sacrifices every double mile from the quay of Assur to the quay of Babylon.¹³

2.3 Failure

A ritual, including a ritual procession, could fail to achieve its goal. Claus Ambos has identified several causes of ritual failure documented in cuneiform sources, including refusal by the gods to communicate what they wanted, interruption of a ritual process by the gods, and mistakes by human participants, such as omitting necessary rituals or utilizing "new" or "foreign" ritual techniques.¹⁴

An example of failure of a ritual procession occurred during the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon. The Assyrians under Sennacherib, Esarhaddon's father, had destroyed the city of Babylon in 689 BC. At that time, they had deported the idols of Marduk and his consort, Zarpanitu, to Assur, the capital of Assyria. Subsequently, Esarhaddon began to restore Babylon, and he decided to return the idols to Babylon as a major gesture of reconciliation with the people of that city. So in 669 BC, the journey from Assur to Babylon began. Esarhaddon was looking forward to joyfully leading the great god in a procession at Babylon into the heart of the city.

However, ten days into the trip, a servant made a strange utterance that was interpreted to be an oracle from Marduk and Zarpanitu. The purported

¹³ Patrick D. Miller, Jr. and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel*, JHNES (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 15–17. Here Miller and Roberts have pointed out similarities between this event and that described in 2 Sam 6. Cf. parallels between 2 Sam 6 and 1 Chr 15 regarding the Israelite ark's journey into David's new royal city of Jerusalem, where he had established his residence and a place for the ark (see esp. 1 Chr 15:1), and Assyrian royal inscriptions describing celebrations attending the installation of deities at new cult centers instituted by kings when they built or restored palaces, which could be in new or reconstructed royal cities (Gary N. Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 10–29: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 12A [New York: Doubleday, 2004], 630–31).

¹⁴ Claus Ambos, "Types of Ritual Failure and Mistakes in Ritual in Cuneiform Sources," in *When Rituals Go Wrong: Mistakes, Failure, and the Dynamics of Ritual*, ed. Ute Hüsken, Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 28–38.

message was a warning that robbers were lying in ambush at or in the vicinity of the city of Dūr-Kurigalzu, and the Assyrians believed that the gods did not wish to continue their procession. Thus, their journey to Babylon was unexpectedly interrupted, and the disappointed Esarhaddon could do nothing about it. He died soon afterward, and the gods were returned to Babylon only later in the first regnal year of Assurbanipal, his son and successor (see above).¹⁵

3. David's First (Failed) Ritual Procession

There are close parallels between David's first attempt to bring the ark to Jerusalem and other ANE processions.

3.1 Mode of Carrying Sacred Object

In David's first procession, the ark was carried on a new cart, which had never been put to common use, and it was driven by two men: Uzza and Ahio (2 Sam 6:3; 1 Chr 13:7). This was how the Philistines had safely returned the ark to Israel years before: by a new cart (1 Sam 6:7–14).¹⁶ Using a cart to carry the ark was an innovation in Israelite ritual practice (see below). It introduced a method by which ANE peoples, other than the Egyptians, impressively transported sacred objects, including for long distances (see above).

3.2 Participants and Activities

As in other important ANE ritual processions, especially those led by royal persons, many participated in David's first procession. These included "all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand" (2 Sam 6:1 ESV), i.e., elite soldiers (cf. 1 Chr 13:1 and also Judg 20:15–16, 34; 1 Sam 13:2; 24:3 [Eng. v. 2]; 26:2). The presence of all these military men would have protected the ark and displayed David's royal power. This was a religious–political event, as when Assurbanipal's army participated in the return of Marduk to his new sanctuary (see above).

¹⁵ Ambos, "Types of Ritual Failure," 31–34.

¹⁶ In this instance, the cart was pulled by two milk cows that had never borne a yoke. Cf. the ritual for an unsolved murder, which utilizes "a heifer which has never been worked, which has never pulled in a yoke" (Deut 21:3 NJPS).

Not only did David include soldiers, he invited “all the house of Israel” (2 Sam 6:5), i.e., all Israelites, including priests and Levites (1 Chr 13:2–6, 8). This was a national celebration that dwarfed other ANE ritual processions. All could join the procession, not only members of the upper ranks of society, by contrast to the socially stratified procession during the Babylonian New Year Festival of Spring (see above).

While David invited priests and Levites, there is no indication that they played a special role in the first procession with the ark (by contrast with his second procession; see below). Rather, the ark was attended by Uzza and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, at whose house the ark had been residing (2 Sam 6:3; 1 Chr 13:7; cf. 1 Sam 7:1). The people who brought the ark to Abinadab’s house had consecrated Eleazar, another of his sons, to guard the sacred chest (1 Sam 7:1). However, there is no indication that Abinadab or his sons were Aaronic priests or Levites. So it appears that priests and Levites were even less prominent in David’s first procession than priests and other cultic functionaries were in the Babylonian procession at the New Year Festival of Spring; these cultic officials followed the king and the gods (see above).

As in some analogous ANE processions (see above), David’s celebration involved music, in this case by singing accompanied by a variety of musical instruments (2 Sam 6:5; 1 Chr 13:8). This playing or celebrating (*piel* of קָנַן)¹⁷ was performed by David, in the role of a musician (e.g., 1 Sam 16:23; Ps 7:1), together with his people, for the pleasure of YHWH (2 Sam 6:5; 1 Chr 13:8—adding “with all their might”). It resembles how musicians and entertainers performed before the idol of Telipinu during his processions to and from the river (see above on this event and also the return of Marduk’s idol to Babylon).¹⁸

3.3 Failure

The problem with carrying a sacred object on a cart is that it could jerk and thereby upset the object, whether due to the roughness of the road or the movement of the animals pulling it. The Hittites apparently recognized this

¹⁷ See *DCH* 8:121.

¹⁸ Weinfeld has pointed out a number of parallels between the Hittite KILAM and Telipinu festivals and 2 Sam 6, including participation of a royal person (king or crown prince), music and dancing, and transportation of sacred objects on carts. On this basis, he suggested that the Israelite processions may reflect some Hittite influence (Weinfeld, “Traces of Hittite Cult,” 110–14).

possibility, but they solved the problem by having a priest hold the image of the god (see above). The Israelites did not have this option because the real presence of the awesome deity called **יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִּים** “YHWH of Hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim” (2 Sam 6:2, my translation), i.e., the cherubim that were on the ark (Exod 25:18–20, 22; Num 7:89), was with the sacred chest. He was not merely represented by a material symbol, such as an idol. The ark neither symbolized Him, nor was it a pedestal for such a symbol. Therefore, the holiness of the ark was too powerful for anyone to be able to sit on the cart in order to hold it.

The exact words identifying Israel’s deity as **יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִּים** only appear once elsewhere in the Bible: 1 Sam 4:4.¹⁹ Here the Israelites presumptuously brought the ark of the covenant of “YHWH of Hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim” from Shiloh with the priests Hophni and Phinehas to their war camp, supposing that it would guarantee victory against the Philistines (vv. 3, 5). We are not told how the ark was carried, but it did not belong in the war camp at this time with the wicked priests Hophni and Phinehas, whom God had condemned (cf. 1 Sam 2:12–17, 22–25).²⁰ The outcome was disastrous. The Philistines defeated the Israelites, killed Hophni and Phinehas, and captured the ark (1 Sam 4:10–11).

So when a discerning reader/hearer of 2 Sam 6:2 encounters the same designation of the ark—the place of enthronement for the living divine King of hosts/armies—as in 1 Sam 4:4, the effect is an implicit warning. David should know that he must be very careful when he has the ark moved, just as the Israelites should have been more careful in the time of Hophni and Phinehas.

¹⁹ The parallel to 2 Sam 6:2 in 1 Chr 13:6 is close—**יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת יֹשֵׁב הַכְּרֻבִּים**, “YHWH, who is enthroned on the cherubim,” without **צְבָאוֹת**, “of Hosts.” The other (of a total of seven) passages referring to YHWH as “enthroned on the cherubim” are 2 Kgs 19:15; Isa 37:16; Ps 80:2 (Eng. v. 1); 99:1.

²⁰ According to 1 Sam 2:25, “it was the will of the Lord to put them to death” (ESV). For the divinely ordered holy war against Midian, Moses had sent with the Israelite army “Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, with the vessels of the sanctuary and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand” (Num 31:6 ESV). The “vessels of the sanctuary” or “sacred utensils” (NJPS) may have included the Urim and Thummim, which were consulted during war (1 Sam 14:41; 28:6), and possibly the ark (cf. Num 14:44; Josh 6:4, 6–9, 11–13; 2 Sam 11:11), which was also associated with consulting God (Judg 20:27–28 and 1 Chr 13:3), likely because of its close connection with the high priest and the Urim and Thummim that he carried in his breastpiece (Exod 28:30; Lev 8:8; cf. Num 27:21).

It is not surprising that the ark shifted on the cart when the oxen pulling it jerked it for some reason.²¹ Nor is it surprising that Uzza, one of the drivers, felt responsible for making sure that the ark did not disastrously fall to the ground. So he grabbed it in order to steady it. His motive was good in that sense, but in this case, the quality of motivation was completely irrelevant. YHWH was angry and struck him dead (2 Sam 6:6–7; 1 Chr 13:9–10). So once again, the outcome of improperly moving the ark was disastrous. In this instance, the mistake was the innovation (for Israelites) of using a cart to transport the ark (see further below), as other ANE peoples moved their sacred objects. Compare recognition in some cuneiform sources that “new” or “foreign” ritual techniques could be problematic.²²

Second Samuel 6:7 says that God killed Uzza because of his *לְשׁוֹ*, which in this context seems to mean something like “indiscretion.”²³ Obviously, he should not have contacted the ark. He should have known this because decades earlier, YHWH had struck a large number of people from Beth-shemesh who looked into/at the ark (apparently uncovering it) when the Philistines returned it to the Israelites (1 Sam 6:19). However, neither account of David’s first procession in 2 Sam 6 and 1 Chr 13 cites a rule that Uzza broke. Perhaps the reader is simply expected to know this. Nevertheless, the narratives of David’s second (successful) ritual procession provide more information (see below).

As when Marduk and his consort unexpectedly interrupted their return journey to Babylon during the reign of Esarhaddon (see above), Israel’s deity unexpectedly brought His procession to a standstill, in this case due to a mistake by a human participant. Not surprisingly, “David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah” (2 Sam 6:8; cf. 1 Chr 13:11). His plan and high hopes were suddenly shattered. The party was over. His deity, for whom he had exerted such effort, not only disappointed him but also humiliated him in front of his entire nation. This was much worse than what Esarhaddon experienced. But just as Esarhaddon had no choice but to submit to the perceived will of Marduk and Zarpanītu, David’s royal authority was powerless before that of YHWH.

²¹ The verb here in 2 Sam 6:6 and 1 Chr 13:9 is *שָׁמַט*, “let drop,” which in this context could mean that the oxen stumbled or fell (DCH 8:437). For other possible meanings of the verb in this context, see HALOT 4:1557–58.

²² Ambos, “Types of Ritual Failure,” 37–38.

²³ DCH 8:363. For other possibilities, see HALOT 4:1502. No Greek equivalent to the prepositional phrase containing this word (*עַל־הַשֵּׁל*, “because of his indiscretion”) appears here in the LXX of 2 Sam 6:7.

David's anger was combined with fear of God, so he indefinitely postponed the resumption of the procession, taking the ark aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite, i.e., from the Philistine city of Gath (2 Sam 6:9–10; 1 Chr 13:12–13). It is remarkable that David left the ark at the home of a foreigner whose name means, "Servant of (the god) Edom." But apparently Obed-edom was now a convert to YHWH.²⁴

This suggests that David viewed the divine outbreak against Uzza as carrying greater significance than the punishment of one individual for his mistake. YHWH's reaction appeared to indicate His disfavor against David and all those involved in the journey.²⁵ David's later speech to the Levites explicitly expresses this idea: "Because you were not there the first time, the LORD our God burst out against us" (1 Chr 15:13 NJPS; emphasis supplied).²⁶

4. David's Second (Successful) Ritual Procession

David regained his courage when he learned that YHWH was blessing the household of Obed-edom because the ark was in his house (2 Sam 6:11–12a; 1 Chr 13:14). This gave hope that relocation of the ark to David's city could bring blessing there too, rather than the potential curse that the king apparently had feared. The deity really was beneficent and His awesome presence desirable, although He was to be treated with extreme respect and His instructions were to be meticulously followed.

Therefore, David organized another procession, which was carried out three months after the first procession, as implied by the notice that the ark remained at the house of Obed-edom for that length of time (2 Sam 6:11; 1 Chr 13:14). It differed from the earlier procession in terms of the way in which the ark was carried, the participants, and the activities that were performed. These factors, some of which by contrast serve as an implicit critique of the first procession, dramatically altered the atmosphere of the event.

²⁴ David L. Thompson, "Obed-edom (Person)," *ABD* 5:5, observes: "His name and origins in Gath may well place him among Philistine expatriates loyal to David (2 Sam 15:18–22; 18:2)." Cf. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *2 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, AB 9 (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 170.

²⁵ Compare the way Aaron was affected when YHWH slew his sons for their ritual failure (Lev 10:19; cf. vv. 1–2).

²⁶ This verse indicates that the Chronicler did not regard Uzza or his brother Ahio as Levites (Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 10–29*, 587).

4.1 Mode of Carrying Sacred Object

This time the ark was carried by men. Second Samuel 6:13a simply refers to those who were carrying the ark of YHWH, without identifying them. But it can be assumed that authorized personnel would have been required for this task. It was Levites who previously had taken the ark down from the cart on which the Philistines returned it to the Israelites (1 Sam 6:15), so their special role in relation to the ark was known at that time.²⁷

If men had borne the ark during the first procession, Uzza would not have died because the need to steady the object would not have arisen. The planning of the first procession was faulty, but the error was recognized and subsequently corrected.

How did those who organized the second procession, i.e., David and his advisors, know that the ark should be carried by men? Second Samuel 6 does not say, but 1 Chr 15 does as it fills in details to provide a more explicit theological perspective. According to 1 Chr 15, David ordered that Levites should carry the sacred chest the rest of the way to the City of David because earlier YHWH had burst out “because we,” i.e., he and his leaders, “did not seek him according to the rule טִפְשָׁה ,” (v. 13 ESV; cf. vv. 2, 12, 14), i.e., the regulation regarding the proper procedure. Here David shared responsibility for the faulty planning of the first procession and indicated that there was a rule that should have been followed. Thus, the Chronicler depicts David as a model monarch who knows earlier Scriptures (cf. Deut 17:18–20) and applies them.²⁸ 1 Chronicles 15:15 identifies the rule from God that had been broken: “The Levites carried the Ark of God by means of poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the LORD” (NJPS).

The pentateuchal instructions for carrying the ark appear in Exod 25:12–15; 37:3–5; Num 1:50; 4:5–6, 15; 7:9; Deut 10:8, according to which the ark was to be carried by Kohathite Levites with poles on their shoulders (as in Egyptian processions) that were permanently inserted through rings on either side of the ark. These directions were followed during movements of the Israelites with the ark in the days of Joshua (Josh 3–4, 6; cf. 8:33).²⁹ The

²⁷ Levites also bear the ark later in 2 Sam 15:24.

²⁸ Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 10–29*, 613.

²⁹ In the book of Joshua the ark is said to be carried by “levitical priests” (3:3; 8:33) or just “priests” (3:6, 8, 13–15, 17; 4:9–11, 16, 18; 6:6, 12). This similarity with Egyptian practice accords with the narrative in the book of Exodus, according to which the sanctuary and its furnishings were constructed soon after the Israelites departed from

poles were long (1 Kgs 8:8), so the Levites could carry the ark while remaining some distance from it.

Thus, 1 Chr 15 interprets the event that is sparsely recorded in 2 Samuel by placing it against the background of the pentateuchal instructions. According to Chronicles, the procedural rule recorded in the Pentateuch was available to David and his leaders, whether or not the Pentateuch was edited in its final form at that time.³⁰ Why didn't David command that this divine instruction be followed for the first procession? He and his advisors were negligent, failing to consult the will of God as revealed through Moses (1 Chr 15:13, 15). They thought they knew what to do, based on their own wisdom, and likely influenced by the practice of other ANE peoples. It is true that the Philistines, who had no Levites, had returned the ark to the Israelites on a new cart pulled by animals (1 Sam 6:7–14). But God expected his covenant people, the Israelites, to do as He had commanded them.

4.1 Participants and Activities

Aside from men carrying the ark, 2 Sam 6:13–15 describes the second resumed procession as a much more religious ritual event than the first.³¹ It included the blowing of at least one *shofar*, an instrument that could be used on sacred occasions (cf. Lev 25:9; Ps 81:4 [Eng. 3]; 98:6; 150:3), David wearing a linen ephod, which was like a priestly garment (e.g., Exod 28:4, 6–8, 12; 1 Sam 2:18, 28), and sacrifices: “When the bearers of the Ark of the LORD had moved forward six paces, he [David] sacrificed an ox and a fattling” (2 Sam 6:13 NJPS).³² Compare the Assyrian sacrifices during the return of Marduk's idol to Babylon (see above).

Egypt. For other connections between the Israelite sanctuary and Egypt, see, e.g., L. S. Baker Jr., “Archaeological Backgrounds of the Sanctuary: A Search for Egyptian Cultural Influence in the Construction of the Hebrew Tent-Sanctuary” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2019).

³⁰ The overall relationship between the understanding of the cult in Samuel as compared to Chronicles is beyond the scope of the present article.

³¹ Pointed out to me by Jacob Milgrom (private communication), referring to the addition of sacrifices.

³² With the plain sense of the MT and, e.g., A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, WBC 11 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 105, against, e.g., P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., who interprets this verse to mean: “whenever the ark bearers advanced six paces, he would sacrifice a fatted bull” (P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and Commentary*, AB 9 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984], 162, 166, 171). Robert P. Gordon suggests: “The implication of the present verse is that thanksgiving was offered to God

Chronicles supplements what is known from 2 Sam 6, shaping the reader's theological understanding by adding further religious details, including elements relating to pentateuchal ritual instructions (see above). For the second procession, David involved many priests and Levites in addition to the Levites bearing the ark, and he ordered them to prepare by consecrating themselves (1 Chr 15:4–14). David wore not only a linen ephod; he was also wrapped in a robe of fine linen, as were the Levites carrying the ark and the singers (v. 27). Instead of a notice regarding sacrifices by David, we read here: "Since God helped the Levites who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD, they sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams" (v. 26 NJPS).

As mentioned above, Chronicles identifies the mistake in the first procession as the failure to have the Levites play a central role by carrying the ark (1 Chr 15:12–15). This diagnosis that YHWH's outbreak was caused at least partly by absence of the Levites interprets the cause of the ritual failure as more complex than simply a wrong move by one ritual participant, namely, Uzza. "In the Chronicler's retelling of his source, the failure of the first ark procession becomes a lesson about the need for the priests and Levites to play a central role in cultic affairs."³³

The fact that the second procession included a number of elements that were not present in the first procession does not necessarily mean that they had been omitted by mistake. It appears that the other religious features, which enhanced the solemnity of the event, were designed as extra "insurance" to honor YHWH in a way that would be pleasing to Him so that He would be happy to move to the City of David without further incident.

Thus far I have discussed discontinuity between the two processions in 2 Sam 6 and 1 Chr 13, 15. However, these journeys were also similar in some important respects. Both were organized as occasions in which many people, including the army, participated in rejoicing with music and dancing, and the king played a prominent role (2 Sam 6:1–2, 5, 12, 14–16; 1 Chr 13:5–6, 8; 15:25, 28–29). A procession with the ark accompanied by such celebration and a royal leader was a religious innovation for the Israelites, analogous to joyful activity involved in cultic processions outside Israel, but this

for an auspicious beginning to a hazardous undertaking" (Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, Library of Biblical Interpretation [Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1986], 233; cf. 1 Chr 15:26—"Since God helped the Levites who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD, they sacrificed seven bulls and seven rams" [NJPS]).

³³ Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 10–29*, 587.

was not problematic as long as the ark was properly carried by the authorized cultic personnel.

As the Anatolian deity Telipinu was entertained and honored by sport competition during his procession, David also carried out vigorous physical activity by dancing before YHWH to honor Him (2 Sam 6:14, 16; 1 Chr 15:29), something that no Israelite leader had done before. Because David was the king, his self-assumed role was highly unusual. There is no indication that the Hittite crown prince lowered his dignity to participate in singing or dancing, as David did. Such activities belonged to entertainers. David was humbling himself as a servant of YHWH, highlighting the ultimate theocratic rule of Israel.

David's processions involved himself and other leaders, explicitly including "the elders of Israel and the commanders of thousands" in 1 Chr 15:25 (ESV), with cultic personnel specially featured in the second procession (esp. vv. 26–27). So these events reflected Israelite society to some extent. However, Samuel and Chronicles do not describe a carefully choreographed and fixed marching order of individuals and groups that would have the effect of affirming social stratification, as in the procession at the Babylonian New Year Festival (see above). Indeed, David's behavior seems calculated to insist that he was one with his people before YHWH, rather than above them.³⁴ That his attempt to project humility succeeded is confirmed by the contemptuous reaction of his wife, Michal, the daughter of Saul (2 Sam 6:16, 20–22), a king who had not adequately submitted himself to YHWH's authority (e.g., 1 Sam 13, 15).

When YHWH's ark was placed in the tent in Jerusalem that David had set up for it, "David sacrificed burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the LORD" (2 Sam 6:17 NJPS; cf. 1 Chr 16:1–2). The fact that sacrifice in this context happened to coincide with Hittite practice when (the idol of) Telipinu was returned to his temple (see above) was irrelevant. Within the Israelite ritual context, it was only fitting to celebrate YHWH's arrival in this way, just as Lev 8–9 describe consecration and inauguration sacrifices when the deity took up residence at His Tent of Meeting.

5. Conclusion: The Nature of God

This article has illuminated dynamics and concepts involved in a particular

³⁴ Cf. one purpose of the law of the king in Deut 17:20: "that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers" (ESV).

instance of ritual failure recorded in biblical narrative accounts. In the absence of Israelite precedent for a king to bring the ark of the covenant into his capital city, David's people initially followed common non-Egyptian ANE protocol by conveying the sacred chest on a cart. However, it appears that there was danger that the ark would be viewed as another ANE divine symbol and that the Israelites could suppose that they were able to control YHWH, as they had attempted to do when they took the ark from Shiloh into battle against the Philistines (1 Sam 4:3–11, esp. v. 3b).

By executing Uzza for touching the ark, YHWH asserted His nature as a volitional, personal, dynamic being who would go to Jerusalem only on His terms.³⁵ To David's credit, he got the message and radically revised the resumed procession, this time following the Torah rule for transporting the ark, emphasizing the transcendence of the deity through the participation of cultic personnel and the performance of sacrifices.

Ritual failure is distressing, but it can also be instructive in highlighting non-negotiable boundaries of interaction with a deity, which reflect the deity's nature.³⁶ This instruction makes an especially deep impression when the failure carries empirically discernible consequences that thwart the realization of the desired efficacy, as when the goal of installing the ark in the City of David was interrupted by Uzza's obvious physical demise.³⁷ The suddenness and severity with which YHWH struck Uzza, as He had struck the men of Beth-shemesh who looked into the ark decades earlier (1 Sam 6:19), effectively demonstrated that He was an awesome being who required the utmost respect and obedience to His rules. One man died, but the potency of the warning may have spared the lives of many more.

³⁵ Compare Exod 40:34–35, where YHWH's glory filled the tabernacle before the ritual consecration and inauguration of the sanctuary (Lev 8–9), showing that His movements were not dependent on human activities (Roy E. Gane, "Leviticus," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009], 1:299).

³⁶ Cf. Ute Hüsken, "Ritual Dynamics and Ritual Failure," in *When Rituals Go Wrong: Mistakes, Failure, and the Dynamics of Ritual*, ed. Ute Hüsken, Numen Book Series: Studies in the History of Religions 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 361—"examples of 'ritual failure' and of 'mistakes' in the ritual context do give an indication of decisive norms" (cf. 337–38).

³⁷ Hüsken identifies several kinds of ritual efficacy, including "operational efficacy," which "relates to the empirically detectable physical, psychological or social effects of a ritual" (Hüsken, "Ritual Dynamics and Ritual Failure," 351, following Moore and Myerhoff), and he goes on to point out: "Diverse modes of efficacy refer to diverse ways a ritual can fail" (p. 352).