

In contrast to other passages where the testimony is put “in the ark” (*bā’ārôn*; Deut 10:2, 5; 1 Kgs 8:9), these passages command Moses to “give” (*ntn*) the testimony “to the ark” (*’el-hā’ārôn*). Similarly, in Num 17, Aaron’s staff is described in verse 22 [ET v. 7] as being set “before YHWH” (*lipnê YHWH*), while in verse 25 [ET v. 10], it is set “before the testimony” (*lipnê hā’êdût*), which is generally read as metonymy for the ark.⁷ This closely parallels Southwest Asian conventions about treaties being placed *before* or *at the feet of* divine images for approval or enforcement (Noegel 2015, 228–29). It suggests the ark was functioning primarily as presencing media, but the language may have been just ambiguous enough to have been reinterpreted in harmony with developing understandings of the ark’s function, helping it to evade excising editorial hands.

It is in the ark’s nature and function as a shrine model, however, that we find the strongest and most numerous connections with the presencing media of surrounding societies.⁸ The closed type of shrine model known from around ancient Southwest Asia matches the ark’s nature as a container, and one such shrine model discovered at Megiddo and dated roughly to the ninth century depicts a windowed building flanked by volutes and winged entities reminiscent of sphynxes or perhaps cherubim (May 1935; see fig. 5.1). Herbert May (1936) described the shrine as a “miniature temple,” and argued for understanding the ark of the covenant as the same (cf. Morgenstern 1942–1943). Wall reliefs commissioned by Tiglath-Pileser III in the late-eighth century BCE (fig. 5.2), and by Sennacherib in the early-seventh century (fig. 5.3), depict Neo-Assyrian forces carrying off cultic media, and each depicts a box containing a miniature divine image as one of the media. While anthropomorphic imagery is not attested in Iron Age Israel and Judah, it is not an enormous conceptual leap to link the tablets that contained some iteration of the law (depending on the source) with cultic stelai, particularly in light of the command to write the words of the law upon cultic stelai in Deut 27:1–10 and Josh 8:32, 34–35. The tablets of the law are also

⁷ Metonymy is a figure of speech in which something is referred to by mentioning something closely related to it. To say someone is headed “to the altar,” for instance, is usually metonymy for the act of getting married, even though there may not be any altar involved.

⁸ Raanan Eichler (2021) rejects this comparison primarily on the grounds that the ark (1) is always described as made of wood and not of stone or clay, (2) is often described with features that are not found on shrine models, and (3) most closely parallels wooden chests, rather than miniature temples. This depends on the latest descriptions of the ark, however, which likely come from well after its disappearance. Eichler’s assertion that it was a container and not a “miniature structure” seems a distinction without a difference, given shrine models were containers. The most detailed descriptions of the ark’s construction and features also represent later elaborations on the ark’s nature and function. Eichler also rejects the conceptualization of the tablets as stelai on the grounds that there is no hint anywhere that the ark’s contents were thought to represent deity.