

Processional Furniture of Ancient Egypt and Early Israel

Towards a material cultural context for the Exodus

David Falk - Ph.D. Egyptology (David.Falk@liv.ac.uk)

Abstract

Temples in ancient Egypt were confines of restricted sacred space. Only priests had access to the inner workings of the temples and their mysteries. During the great festivals, the gods that dwelled in these sanctums went on procession for everyone to see travelling to other temples in barks of wood and gold. These barks were typical of furniture that was both religious and processional. Study of the construction and use of *ritual processional furniture* (abbr. RPF) could shed light upon the cultural context of Israelite processional furniture.

Barks and Sacred Space

Inside many Egyptian temples was a sanctuary that contained a pedestal, upon which sat a sacred bark. By the 18th Dynasty, this bark shrine became known as the *st wrt* or “great seat.” The sacred bark was an elaborate shrine in the shape of a boat. Like the greater temple around it, the bark was a microcosm of layers of sacred space. The bark area of sacred space was separated from the inner box shrine by a veil of linen and gold foil vulture introduced during the reign of Thutmosis I. Inside the box shrine, two minor winged goddesses sat facing towards one another with the major god in the centre. At the very centre is a throne upon which the god himself sits. This is the throne within the “great seat.” The idea of small sacred spaces is a useful tool in discussing issues surrounding RPF.



Reconstruction of the Israelite Ark of the Covenant of the Lord.

Importance of Study

The Pentateuch claims that the Israelites emerged from captivity in Egypt during the latter half of the 2nd Millennium BC, even though many modern scholars (Wellhausen, Alt, Noth, von Rad, Thompson, and Van Seters) claim that the Pentateuch was written in 6th century Babylon. Textual, iconographic, and material culture evidence can be used to see if the Pentateuch's claim is consistent with its self-reported context. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue regarding the context of the Pentateuch by comparing RPF of Egypt with the earliest Israelite cultic expressions, which includes the Ark of the Covenant.

Israelite Ritual Furniture

Early Israelite RPF, including altars, were constructed of wood covered with metal foil, which is a distinctly Egyptian design pattern. Levantine horned altars were made of stone. Altars constructed after the Israelite Conquest used the construction techniques of the Levant (Josh 8:31). The Ark of the Covenant is a special case even among the furniture of the Tabernacle. It clearly is furniture with a ritual use that was used in procession (Josh 3:17; 1 Sam 4:4-5); and it is only piece of Tabernacle furniture where the pole rings are attached to the feet (Exod 25:12).



Priests carrying the bark of Amun-Re. A relief from the Red Chapel of Hatshepsut.



Ritual Chest from tomb of Tutankhamun

Characteristics of RPF

(1) RPF has to be furniture, (2) must have a ritual or religious use, (3) must have a repeated, periodic, or continuous function where that item is used in a procession or parade, (4) is dedicated or somehow connected to a person, whether human or deity, and (5) usually has carrying poles placed below the centre of gravity of the item, such that the intent of the item is to be seen, not to provide stability in transport. In Egypt, three varieties of furniture adhere to these criteria: ritual chests, sacred barks, and portable sacred thrones.

Thrones and Amarna

During the Amarna period, famous for the first monotheistic religious reforms, King Akhenaten cut off the royal endowments to the temples of Egypt. Without the endowments, the temples did not receive grain, sacrifices were not made, and priests were out of work. The temples were forced to close and the procession of the sacred barks ceased. Without a visible sign of divinity for the public, a crisis of symbols ensued. In response, Akhenaten invented the portable sacred throne, a new kind of palanquin. Palanquins were not new to Egypt being used extensively since the Old Kingdom by any wealthy person. Starting in the Amarna Period, the palanquin takes on a radical design change. The portable sacred throne borrowed the iconography of the sacred barks, so much so that it became a sacred object, which during the Amarna period replaced the sacred bark as a focus for ritual procession. Upon Tutankhamun's restoration of the old religion, portable thrones and sacred barks were used together until the end of the New Kingdom.

Preliminary Results

The Pentateuch contains at least two Egyptian loan words in connection with the Ark of the Covenant that would not be part of a 6th century Babylonian context. The iconography of the Ark bears strong similarities to the iconography found on Egyptian portable sacred thrones. The Ark is an ideal fit as RPF and follows a strict Egyptian design pattern. Preliminary evidence suggests that early Israelite RPF probably came out of an Egyptian cultural context no earlier than the Amarna period and no later than the end of Dynasty 20.

Bibliography

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