

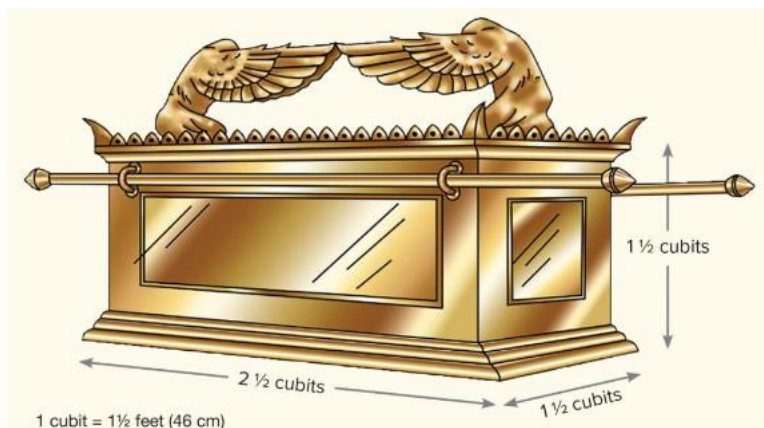
UZZAH AND THE ARK

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I. Background

Soon after the Israelites left Egypt in 1446 B.C., God instructed Moses to have the people build for him a mobile sanctuary, the tabernacle, that he might dwell among them in a distinctive way (Ex. 25:8-9). The most sacred portion of that tabernacle, the Most Holy Place, was to contain the ark (Ex. 26:33-34), a rectangular, gold-plated wooden chest of specified dimensions (Ex. 25:10-11, 37:1-2), the lid of which, called the mercy seat, was made of pure gold and topped with two hammered cherubim figures whose extended wings overshadowed the lid (Ex. 25:17-21, 37:6-9). The ark was equipped with two gold-plated poles, each of which passed through a pair of gold rings, so that it could be carried without being touched (Ex. 25:12-14, 37:1-5). These poles were not to be removed (Ex. 25:15; 1 Ki. 8:8).¹ Here is a proposed reconstruction:²



The Lord manifested himself in a distinctive way at the mercy seat. He met there with Moses (Ex. 25:21-22, 30:6; Num. 7:89) and was there on the Day of Atonement when the high priest offered a sacrifice for the sins of the people (Lev. 16:2). He was "enthroned" on the cherubim (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 1 Chron. 13:6), and thus the ark served as "the throne of an invisible God,"³ a symbol of God himself. As such, it was to be treated as the most sacred of objects, treated with a fear and awe commensurate with the greatness of the God whose presence it symbolized.

¹ For the alleged conflict between Ex. 25:15 and Num. 4:6 regarding removal of the poles, see Raanan Eicher, "The Poles of the Ark: On the Ins and Outs of a Textual Contradiction," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 4 (2016): 733–741.

² From *Ark of the Covenant: Purpose and Symbolism of the Ark* (Peabody, MA: Rose Publishing, 2020).

³ Daniel E. Fleming, "Religion" in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 678. "Placed within the most holy place of the tabernacle, it represented the throne of Yahweh." Kenton L. Sparks, "Ark of the Covenant" in Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *Dictionary Old Testament: Historical Books* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 88.

When the Israelite camp set out for a new location, the priests (Aaron and his sons) would cover the ark and other holy objects of the sanctuary in preparation for them to be carried by the sons of Kohath, one of the sons of Levi (Num. 4:4-6, 15, 10:21).⁴ Only the Kohathites were permitted to carry these objects, but they were forbidden from touching any of them upon pain of death (Num. 4:15). That is why the poles were needed. Indeed, the Lord warned that if the Kohathites even glanced at the holy things in the sanctuary they would be put to death (Num. 4:17-20). One is reminded of God's warning in Ex. 19:11-13 that every human or animal that touched Mount Sinai during the divine epiphany, with the exception of Moses (Ex. 19:20), was to be put to death.

The sons of Gershon, a son of Levi, were charged with transporting the curtains, ropes, and coverings (Num. 4:24-28), and the sons of Merari, another son of Levi, were responsible for the pillars, bases, frames, pegs, and cords (Num. 4:29-33). Because the holy things for which the Kohathites were responsible were only to be carried by poles on their shoulders, the wagons and oxen that had been offered to the Lord were distributed only to the Gershonites and Merarites for their use in the service of the tabernacle (Num. 7:1-9).

Israel entered the Promise Land under Joshua in 1406 B.C. The period when Judges ruled commenced not long after the death of Joshua (Judg. 1:1), which one can reasonably estimate occurred around 1366 B.C., and ended with the anointing of Saul as king (1 Samuel 10) around 1051 B.C.⁵ This was a dark time in Israel's history, a time when there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judg. 17:6, 21:25). The people repeatedly abandoned the Lord, were oppressed by a foreign power as divine punishment, cried out for deliverance, and then were delivered by a Judge whom God raised up, only to repeat the cycle time after time. Robert Hubbard, Jr. remarks, "The book of Judges teems with violent invasions, apostate religion, unchecked lawlessness, and tribal civil war. These threatened fledgling Israel's very survival."⁶

Late in the period of the Judges, Hophni and Phineas, the wicked sons of Eli the priest, were engaged in the grave sin of treating the Lord's offering with contempt by taking for themselves portions of the offering (1 Sam. 2:12-17) and were having sexual relations with women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting (1 Sam. 2:22).⁷ The Lord was determined to put them to death (1 Sam. 2:25) and to punish Eli by bringing hardship on his household and lineage because he had tolerated his sons' blasphemy (1 Sam. 2:27-36, 3:12-14).

⁴ The three sons of Levi were Kohath, Gershon, and Merari (Gen. 46:11). One of Kohath's sons was Amram, the father of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses (1 Chron. 6:2-3).

⁵ See Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 146-151 and Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 178-179.

⁶ Robert Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 84.

⁷ Robert D. Bergen states in *1, 2 Samuel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 81, "Perhaps these women were Nazirites involved in volunteer service at the worship site (cf. Num 6:2; Exod 38:8); alternatively, they may have been cultic prostitutes. However, they were being treated as though they were pagan shrine prostitutes (cf. Hos 4:14)."

The judgment begins with Israel's defeat by the Philistines at the battle of Aphek.⁸ This prompted the people to send to Shiloh and to carry (*nāsā*)⁹ the ark from there to the Israelite camp in the hope that its presence would reverse their military fortune. Hophni and Phineas accompanied the ark, which presumably was covered because of its holiness.¹⁰ But instead of producing victory, Israel suffered a great defeat. The ark was captured by the Philistines, Hophni and Phineas were killed, and Eli died when he heard the news (1 Sam. 4:1-18). In the words of the psalmist, "[God] forsook his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mankind, and delivered his power to captivity, his glory to the hand of the foe" (Ps. 78:60-61).

The ark's presence in Philistia caused such death, disease, and fear in the various cities to which it was taken that after seven months the decision was made to send it back (1 Sam. 5:1 – 6:1). The Philistines placed it, along with a guilt offering (five golden tumors and five golden mice), on a new cart and watched to see if the two cows drawing the cart would head back to the land from which the ark came. They did so, confirming that the harms that had befallen the Philistines were indeed caused by God and not coincidental (1 Sam. 6:1-12).

On returning to Israel, the cart stopped in a field in Beth Shemesh, which was about 18 miles west-southwest of Jerusalem and about 10 miles southwest of Kiriath Jearim. The people who were present for reaping the wheat harvest rejoiced when they saw the ark, and then Levites removed it from the cart, presumably having covered it, and placed it and the box with the golden guilt offerings on a large nearby stone.¹¹ Thereafter, the men of Beth Shemesh offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord, using the wood of the cart to fuel the fire, and offered additional unspecified burnt offerings and sacrifices (1 Sam. 6:14-15).

The fact cows were offered as a burnt offering when the law specified that male animals were to be used in burnt offerings (Lev. 1:3, 10) signals that some in Beth Shemesh lacked proper reverence for the things of God. This is confirmed in 1 Sam. 6:19, where it is reported that the Lord struck down seventy¹² men of Beth Shemesh because they dared to look into (or upon) the ark. They disregarded the ark's holiness and sanctity, acting as though their desire to celebrate suspended the rules for interacting with it, and as a result, the ark's presence became a judgment on them as it had on the Philistines. Consequently, they are left to ask in 1 Sam. 6:20, "Who is able to stand before the LORD, this holy God? And to whom shall he go up away from us?"

⁸ Merrill (p. 149) dates the battle of Aphek to 1104 B.C.

⁹ David Toshio Tsumura notes in *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 192, "To carry the ark is the proper method of moving it (see 2 Sam. 6:13; cf. 2 Sam. 6:3; also Deut. 10:8; Josh. 3:6; 6:6; 1 K. 2:26)."

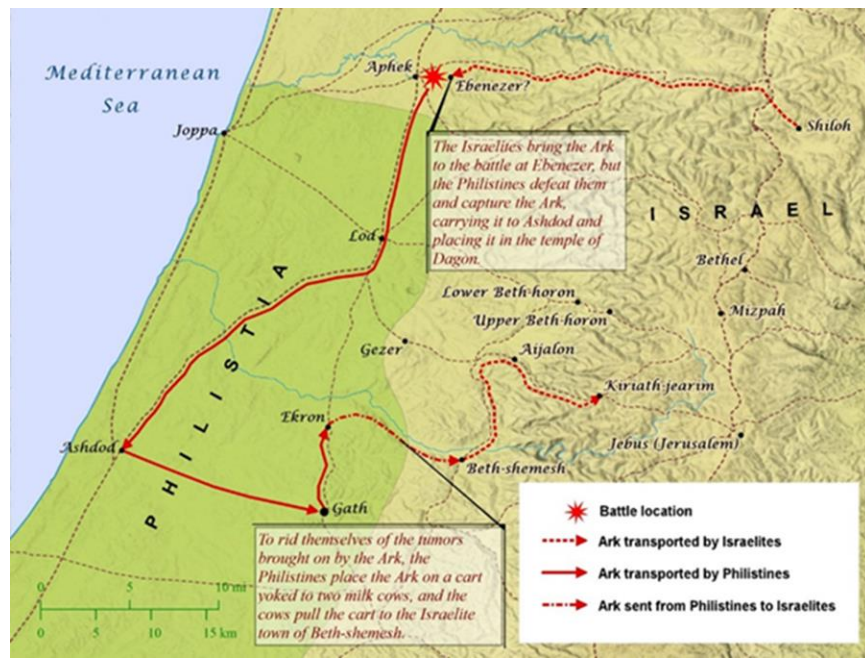
¹⁰ It was recognized as the ark despite being covered (1 Sam. 4:5) by its shape, cover, and means of transport in the context of people having been dispatched to bring it to the camp.

¹¹ Bergen points out (p. 102), "Beth Shemesh was a Levitical city set aside for the clan of Kohath, the Levitical family charged with responsibility of caring for the ark of the covenant (Num 4:4,15) and was also a designated home for the descendants of Aaron (cf. Josh 21:13-16)."

¹² The Masoretic Text reports the number anomalously as "70 men, 50,000 men," as does the majority of LXX manuscripts. Some later Hebrew manuscripts and Josephus (*Ant.* VI.1.4 [§ 16]) omit the 50,000. Most modern English versions treat the 50,000 as a later addition and thus ignore it. See, e.g., D. M. Fouts, "Added Support for Reading '70 Men' in 1 Samuel VI 19," *Vetus Testamentum* 42 (1992), 394 and other possibilities discussed in Tsumura, 226-227.

David Firth remarks, "God's holiness is both blessing and danger, depending on how it is treated."¹³

As the Philistines were eager to remove the ark from their midst, so the people of Beth Shemesh asked the people of Kiriath Jearim¹⁴ to come and take the ark to their town, which they did, putting it in Abinadab's house (1 Sam. 6:21 – 7:1). Abinadab's son Eleazar was consecrated to guard or have charge over the ark. Bergen comments, "No genealogical information regarding Abinadab of Kiriath Jearim or Eleazar his son is provided in the Bible; however, Eleazar is a common priestly name in the Old Testament (cf. Exod 6:23; 1 Chr 9:20; 23:21; Ezra 8:33) and it is possible both men were members of the Levitical tribe."¹⁵ Though Kiriath Jearim was not a Levitical city, perhaps there was a link with the nearby Levitical city of Gibeon (Josh. 21:17), as the two were associated as one of the four Hivite cities (Josh. 9:17).¹⁶



Firth observes, "The holiness of Yahweh that had so distressed the Beth Shemeshites is not a problem [in Kiriath Jearim], indicating that the ark's treatment was acceptable."¹⁷ That seems more likely if the ark was in the care of a Levitical family. Josephus believed Abinadab was a Levite (*Ant.* 6.1.4). John Woodhouse states, "Since the proper handling of the ark by Levites was mentioned earlier (1 Samuel 6:15), and care was taken to 'consecrate' Eleazar for the task of keeping the ark, there is an implication that Abinadab and consequently his son Eleazar were proper persons for this task – that is, Levites (Numbers 3:31; Deuteronomy 10:8; 31:9, 25; Joshua 3:3; 8:33)."¹⁸ James Smith likewise opines, "It is not stated that Abinadab was a Levite; but this is very probable, because otherwise they would hardly have consecrated his son to be the

¹³ David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, AOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 103.

¹⁴ It was also called Baalah (Josh. 15:9), Kiriath-baal (Josh. 15:60), and Baale-judah (2 Sam. 6:2).

¹⁵ Bergen, 104.

¹⁶ V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 91.

¹⁷ Firth, 101.

¹⁸ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), 125.

keeper of the ark."¹⁹ (I explain below why David's statements in 1 Chron. 15:2, 13 do not exclude the possibility that Abinadab was a Levite.)

II. The Event

The ark remained at Kiriath Jearim uneventfully for well over a century, until after David began reigning over all Israel from Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:2; 1 Chron. 13:6; 2 Chron. 1:4).²⁰ As Bergen notes, the twenty years mentioned in 1 Sam. 7:2 refers not to the entire time the ark remained in Kiriath Jearim but to the time it was there before the mentioned reformation, the time when "all the house of Israel lamented after the LORD."²¹

As reported in 2 Sam. 6:1-10 and 1 Chron. 13:1-13, David and his entourage went to Kiriath Jearim (also called Baale-judah and Baalah) to bring the ark from the house of Abinadab (now certainly deceased) to Jerusalem. The ark was placed on a new cart, as the Philistines had done, that was drawn by oxen, and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons (i.e., descendants) of Abinadab, were guiding the cart toward Jerusalem. Presumably the ark was covered, but nothing is said about that. David and many Israelites were celebrating before the cart with songs accompanied by a variety of musical instruments.

When the cart reached the threshing floor of Nacon/Chidon, the oxen stumbled, and Uzzah grabbed the ark (!), presumably from concern it might topple. The anger of the Lord burned against Uzzah, and he killed him on the spot because of his irreverence (2 Sam. 6:7)²² in putting his hand on the ark (1 Chron. 13:10). Long comments: "Uzzah acts improperly in respect of the ark, Yahweh becomes angry and Uzzah pays the ultimate price. Uzzah may have been well intentioned in seeking to steady the ark, but his manner of approach betrays a lack of care and respect towards the primary symbol of the presence of God."²³

God declared in Num. 4:15 that the Kohathites must not touch the holy things of the tabernacle that they were charged with transporting, or they would die. And they were only to transport them by carrying them on long poles resting on their shoulders (Ex. 25:12-14, 37:1-5;

¹⁹ James E. Smith, *1 and 2 Samuel*, CPNIVC (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2000), 109.

²⁰ As noted, the ark was taken to the battle of Aphek around 1104 B.C., where it was captured by the Philistines. They kept it for only seven months (1 Sam. 6:1), and it stayed only a short time in Beth Shemesh before being taken to Kiriath Jearim. According to Merrill (p. 244, 262), David's reign in Jerusalem began in 1004 B.C., and the ark was moved to the new tabernacle he had constructed around 977 B.C. Andrew E. Steinmann in *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 123, calculates the date the ark was moved to Jerusalem to be 975 B.C. Regarding Saul's alleged transfer of the ark from Kiriath Jearim, 1 Samuel 14:18 is rendered in the NET: "So Saul said to Ahijah, 'Bring near the ephod,' for he was at that time wearing the ephod." The NET note states:

Heb "the ark of God." It seems unlikely that Saul would call for the ark, which was several miles away in Kiriath-jearim (see 1 Sam 7:2). The LXX and an Old Latin MS have "ephod" here, a reading which harmonizes better with v. 3 and fits better with the verb "bring near" (see 1 Sam 23:9; 30:7) and with the expression "withdraw your hand" in v.19. This reading is followed in the present translation (cf. NAB, TEV, NLT).

²¹ Bergen, 106 (fn. 76).

²² The noun *šal* occurs only here in the OT, and it is debated whether it is best rendered "error" or "irreverence." Major English versions opting for the latter include NAS, NAU, HCSB, NIV, and CSB.

²³ Long, 324.

Num. 7:1-9). They specifically were not given wagons and oxen for their service because they were not permitted to move the holy objects in that manner (Num. 7:1-9). The fact this requirement was ignored in favor of using a new cart as was done by the Philistines indicates a careless or dismissive attitude toward the things of God. Perhaps familiarity with the ark from its longtime presence had bred complacency toward it.

Just as the irreverent attitude that was expressed in the improper burnt offering by the men of Beth Shemesh led them to believe their desire to celebrate nullified or trumped the demands of holiness as specified by God, allowing them to look into the ark, so the irreverent attitude that was expressed in using a cart to transport the ark led Uzzah to believe his desire that the ark not fall nullified or trumped the demands of holiness as specified by God, allowing him to put his hands on it. That was an act of extreme sacrilege that would never have crossed the mind of a reverent Jew, no matter the circumstance. They would have given the ark wide berth, as we might do with a live electrical wire, knowing that touching it was certain death regardless of the motive for doing so.

David was angry because the Lord's wrath had come on Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:8; 1 Chron. 13:11), but the object of his anger is not stated. It is unlikely he was angry with God since he was merely enforcing the boundary of holiness he had previously declared. Rather, David probably was angry with Uzzah for his recklessness and perhaps with himself and his assistants for not ensuring the ark was being transported as specified in the law.²⁴ What was to be a joyful celebration and a divine blessing and confirmation of David's rule was turned into an occasion of mourning and fear. Bergen writes:

Having witnessed a dramatic demonstration of the Lord's zeal to protect his holiness, David became "afraid of the LORD that day" (v. 9). His deepened respect for the Lord's power and for his willingness to use it against anyone who would violate the Torah caused David to ask, "How can the ark of the LORD ever come to me?" Brueggemann notes the fear generated by this event was positive, for "when people are no longer awed, respectful, or fearful of God's holiness, the community is put at risk."²⁵

David's concern about the ark's potential danger caused him temporarily to change his plan to bring the ark to Jerusalem. Instead, he took it to the house of a Levite named "Obed-edom the Gittite" somewhere between Kiriath Jearim and Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:9-10; 1 Chron. 13:12-13). That Obed-edom was a Levite is clear from the fact he is listed among them in 1 Chron. 15:16-18. Ronald Youngblood explains:

While it is true that "Gittite" can refer to someone whose hometown was the Philistine city of Gath (cf. Goliath in 1Sa 17:4, 23; 2Sa 21:19), it is unlikely that David would entrust the ark to the care of a Philistine. Since *gat* is the ordinary word for "(wine)press," the epithet "Gittite" can be used with respect to any activity (cf. the enigmatic feminine form *gittit* in the titles of Pss 8; 81; 84) or place name (cf. Gath Hopher [Jos 19:13; 2Ki 14:25]; Gath Rimmon [Jos 19:45];

²⁴ See, e.g., Bergen, 330; Long, 325

²⁵ Bergen, 330.

21:24-25; 1Ch 6:69]) related to winepresses. Indeed, it is even possible that Obed-Edom was originally from Gittaim ("Two [Wine]presses"; see Notes on 4:3).

In any case, despite the skepticism of some commentators (e.g., McCarter, Smith), Obed-Edom was a Levite (1Ch 15:17-18, 21, 24-25; 16:4-5, 38; Josephus, Ant. 7.83 [4.2]) – in fact, he was a Kohathite Levite if Gath Rimmon in Dan or Manasseh was his hometown (Jos 21:20, 24-26; 1Ch 6:66, 69; cf. Kirkpatrick).²⁶

The Lord blessed the household of Obed-edom during the three months the ark was there, and when this was told to David, he went to bring the ark from Obed-edom's house to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:11-12; 1 Chron. 13:14). This time, however, David announced "that no one but the Levites may carry the ark of God, for the LORD had chosen them to carry the ark of the LORD and to minister to him forever" (1 Chron. 15:2), and he said to the Levites, "Because you did not carry it the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not seek him according to the rule" (1 Chron. 15:13). It is recorded in 1 Chron. 15:14-15: "So the priests and the Levites consecrated themselves to bring up the ark of the LORD, the God of Israel. And the Levites carried the ark of God on their shoulders with the poles, as Moses had commanded according to the word of the LORD." In that way, the ark came safely to the city of David amidst much rejoicing and celebration (2 Sam. 6:17; 1 Chron. 15:29).

Some claim David's statement to the Levites in 1 Chron. 15:13 excludes the possibility that Abinadab was a Levite, as I claimed above, but that is not the case. David does not deny that Uzzah and Ahio, the sons (descendants) of Abinadab who guided the cart that was transporting the ark on the first attempt to bring it to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:3), were Levites. Rather, he says, "Because you [Levites] *did not carry it* the first time, the LORD our God broke out against us, because we did not seek him *according to the rule*." The wrong was failing to follow the prescribed means of transport, using a cart instead of poles, which led to the forbidden touching of the ark and consequent wrath against Uzzah (2 Sam. 6:6-7), not that Uzzah and Ahio were not Levites. That seems clear from 1 Chron. 15:15: "And the Levites *carried* the ark of God *on their shoulders with the poles*, as Moses *had commanded* according to the word of the LORD." Nor is the possibility of Abinadab's Levitical ancestry excluded by David's statement in 1 Chron. 15:2 that no one but the Levites may carry the ark of God. He simply may have been issuing a reminder on the verge of the new attempt that transporting the ark was restricted to Levites not implying that this requirement had been violated on the prior occasion.

²⁶ Ronald F. Youngblood, "1, 2 Samuel" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 3:369. Joyce G. Baldwin states in *1 and 2 Samuel*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 208, "[Obed-edom] was probably a Levite, in view of his being entrusted with the ark. At least three Israelite towns had names compounded with Gath, from one of which this man originally came." Bergen (p. 330-331) states, "David ordered that the ark be taken to the house of a Levite (cf. 1 Chr 15:16-18), Obed-Edom the Gittite (v. 11). He was associated with a location of uncertain identity that had an olive or wine press (Hb. *gat*). Perhaps Obed-Edom's residence was the closest levitical residence to the disaster; at that site, they hoped, further catastrophes could be avoided."