
The Ark of the Covenant

From the teaching of R. B. Thieme, Jr., Pastor, Berachah Church, Houston, Texas

The Ark of the Covenant is described in Exo. 25:10-22, 37:1-9.

The Ark of the Covenant is so called because the ten commandments, or the Mosaic Covenant, were deposited in it.

Num. 10:33; Deut. 31:26; Heb.9:4.

It contained three items:

- the tablets of the Law,
- Aaron's rod that budded,
- and the pots of manna.

It is also called the Ark of the testimony, because it witnessed God's holiness and the people of Israel's sinfulness, Exo. 25:16, 22

It is called the Ark of God to indicate God's presence with Israel, 1 Sam. 3:3; 4:11.

As a symbol of divine presence, the Ark was carried at the head of the column of the army as the point, thus indicating divine protection of the Jews while in transit, Num. 10:33; Deut. 1:33; Psalm 132:8.

The Ark of the Covenant was involved in the crossing of the Jordan, Joshua 3:11-17; 4:7, 11, 18. The Ark held back the water.

The Ark was used as an offensive weapon on Jericho, Joshua 6:4-12.

The Ark was captured by the Philistines. They had nothing but trouble with it, so they sent it back, 1 Sam 4:3-11; compare also 5:7, 7:2.

The Ark stayed at Kiriath-Jearim (1 Sam 7:2) until David moved the Ark to Jerusalem,

A soldier was killed for handling it, 2 Samuel 6:1-19.

Solomon had the Ark put in the temple when it was built, 1 Kings 8:6-9. It stayed there except during the reign of Manasseh, who put up phallic images in the Holy of Holies. It was restored by the Levites, 2 Chron. 35:3.

The Ark was destroyed in 586 BC, under the fifth cycle of discipline, by Nebuchadnezzar. There is no record of its ever being replaced.

Why? Because it was no longer needed, says Jer. 3:16.

The Ark in relation to the mercy seat, Hebrews 9:4; Romans 3.

1. The wood represents Christ's humanity, the gold His deity.
2. The tables of the Law represent sin in the sense of transgression of known divine laws.
3. Aaron's rod that budded represents sin in revolt against God's order.
4. The pot of manna represents sin as rejection of God's provision.
5. Sin inside the Ark is a picture of the work of the cross. Christ bore our sins inside of Himself.
6. The mercy seat is God's side of the cross. The cherubs represent the perfect righteousness and justice of the Father, both of which are satisfied by the blood of Christ, sprinkled on the mercy seat.
7. In the Millennium the presence of Christ replaces the Ark.

From International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

The **Ark of the Covenant** was a portable chest of acacia wood containing various articles and serving as the meeting place of Yahweh with Israel.

I. Biblical Data

A. Pentateuch Ex. 25:10-22 records the command to Moses to build an ark of acacia wood. Within this ark were to be placed the "testimony" (Heb *'edût*), an apparent reference in this context to the tables of the law that God was about to give to Moses. Upon the top of the ark, probably not as a lid but above the lid, the mercy seat (Heb *kapporet*; Gk *hilastérion*, He. 9:5) was to be placed. This was a golden plate upon which two cherubim, with raised wings and facing each other, covered the ark. From the place between the two cherubim God

promised to speak to Moses, and the whole structure was to be placed in the innermost room (holy of holies) of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:33).

In Deuteronomy the ark's origin is the subject of a much abbreviated narrative, the command to build and its execution forming part of the account of Moses' creation of the second two tablets of the law (Dt. 10:1-5). Commentators have often pointed out that the parallel account in Exodus would be found in Ex. 33:1-6, and many have argued that following v 6 there must originally have been a statement concerning the erection of the sacred ark. Adherents to the documentary theory hold that this material, which consists of E-document narrative interposed within the dominant P source for the legal prescriptions, was originally separate from the entire section on the tabernacle and its furnishings, and should therefore contain some record of the making of the ark. If the material is parallel to that in Dt. 10, however, it is not clear that the making of the ark should in fact be introduced in Ex. 33 rather than in Ex. 34, following the commandment to make two additional tablets of stone. What has given rise to the suggestion is not some kind of exact parallel with the Deuteronomic material, but rather the enigmatic nature of the reference to God's withdrawal in Ex. 33:1-6 and the subsequent apparent reversal of this action in vv 7ff. If the ark is the symbol of God's presence in Israel, it should logically figure in the narrative at some point; thus the attempt to match this narrative with that of Dt. 10.

A final reference of note is found in Nu. 10:33-36, in which appears the so-called Song of the Ark. This passage, considered to be very early by most critics, establishes the ark's position as accompanying Israel in its wilderness journeying. The "Song," which will be considered again below, seems to identify Yahweh and the ark in the closest possible fashion.

B. Historical Books According to the narrative in Josh. 3 the ark cooperated at the crossing of the Jordan in such a way that the waters of the river ceased to flow as soon as the feet of the priests who were carrying the ark entered the

water, and that they stood still above that point until these priests left the bed of the river. In the account of the solemn march around Jericho, which according to ch 6 caused the walls of the city to fall, the carrying of the ark around the city is regarded as an essential feature in vv 4, 7, 11. In ch 7 it is narrated that Joshua, after the defeat of the army before Ai, lamented and prayed before the ark. In 8:30-34 the ark is mentioned as forming the central focus for the assemblage of Israel on Ebal and Gerizim, an action reminiscent of the later assembly in Shechem (ch 24) which contains, however, no record of the ark.

Just where the ark was during the period of the judges is still a matter of some uncertainty. According to Josh. 18:1 the center of the amphictyony had moved to Shiloh during the time of Joshua, though the tent of meeting, not the ark, is mentioned in this connection. A brief reference in Jgs. 2:1 to a movement of "the angel of the Lord" from Gilgal to Bochim (LXX adds "unto Bethel") has given rise to the idea that at least one tradition saw the ark in Bethel during the entire period. This, so the argument goes, is confirmed by the ark's appearance in Bethel at the close of the period of the judges (Jgs. 20:18, 26-28), and the lack of mention of Shiloh in Jgs. 20. Such arguments are not entirely convincing when it is noted that Judges does, like Joshua, place the religious center of the amphictyony in Shiloh (18:31).

Furthermore, the cult center is called the house of God (*bêt ha'elohîm*) in that passage, and it is quite possible that the reference to Bethel (Heb *bêt-'el*, "house of God") in ch 20 is also a reference to the ark or tent of meeting in Shiloh. Conversely, the ark could well have been resident in Shiloh but simply moved to Bethel for convenience at the battle, although 20:27 seems to indicate a period of general residence for the ark in that place. In view of the otherwise unbroken testimony to the ark's presence in Shiloh (excepting only the LXX of Jgs. 2:1) it seems best to explain the Bethel reference by some means such as that suggested above.

At the time of Eli the ark stood in the sanctuary at Shiloh (1 S. 3:3). It was taken from this place after Israel had been defeated by the Philistines

at Ebenezer, in order to assure the help of Yahweh to the people, but instead of this the ark fell into the hands of the Philistines (ch 4). The various misfortunes that then afflicted the Philistines induced them to regard the possession of the ark as a calamity (ch 5), and they sent it back to Israel (ch 6). It was taken first to Beth-shemesh in the border-country between Philistia and Judah and soon after to Kiriath-jearim about 7 1/2 mi (12 km) NW of Jerusalem. There the ark remained for years (unless 1 S. 14:18 be an exception, but cf. the LXX where "ephod" is read in place of "ark") in the house of a man named Abinadab, whose son was its guardian (7:1), until David had it removed to Mt. Zion after he had established his camp and court there. He placed it in a tent (see TABERNACLE) prepared for it (2 S. 6; 1 Ch. 16:1).

In David's time the ark was taken again into battle (2 S. 11:11). When David fled from Absalom the priests wanted to accompany him with the ark, but he sent it back (2 S. 15:24f). David had also intended to build a temple in which the ark was to be located, since before this it had always found its resting-place in a tent. But God forbade this through Nathan, because He was willing to build a house for David, but unwilling that David should build one for Him (2 S. 7). Solomon then built the temple and placed the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies, where it was located under the wings of two mighty cherubim images (1 K. 8; 2 Ch. 5).

C. Prophetic and Poetic Books Jer. 3:16 states that in the future new Jerusalem nobody will concern himself about the ark, nor make an attempt to rebuild it — presumably in view of the ark's loss or destruction in the collapse of the city in 586 B.C. Only one reference in the Psalms explicitly mentions the ark (Ps. 132), but recent study of this psalm in connection with 2 S. 6 has convinced commentators that there is a whole genre of praise literature properly associated with the ark narratives in Samuel. Even considering the excesses to which this kind of scholarship has tended in modern times, it is certainly reasonable to see in various references within the Psalms (e.g., 78:61; 26:8) allusions to the ark. One need not

reorient Israel around an illusionary New Year's Festival to appreciate the enthronement nature of certain psalms and the reenactment of the ascent of the ark in connection with the liturgical celebration of the new king, or the ultimate position of Yahweh as the truly enthroned monarch of Israel. To say that the king and the ark were probably in close contact does not, however, justify claims that the ark was considered a repository for Yahweh or that the king represented Yahweh in a cultic reenactment. The Lord was from the beginning in heaven, although His presence was somehow implied in the possession of the little rectangular chest that figured so prominently in Israel's history and, undoubtedly, its worship as well.

D. New Testament In the NT the ark of the covenant is mentioned only in He. 9:4, in the description of the Jewish tabernacle, though a heavenly counterpart does appear in Rev. 11:19.

II. Form of the Ark

The ark was a chest made of acacia wood, 2 1/2 cubits long, 1 1/2 cubits wide, and 1 1/2 cubits high. That there are two widely varying traditions, whereby the ark is represented in the so-called P document as an elaborate golden shrine, and in the earlier narratives as a simple wooden chest, is not clear from the Scriptures themselves. The statement of Dt. 10:3 and the full account of instructions in Ex. 25 are in agreement so far as they go. Exodus, in addition to mentioning an acacia-wood chest, goes on to prescribe an overlay of gold within and without, and a molding of gold running all around. At the feet of the ark were to be four rings of gold for use with the gold-covered carrying staves. These staves are also mentioned in 1 K. 8:7f; 2 Ch. 5:8f, while reference is often made to those who carried the ark (2 S. 6:13; 15:24). Such carefully crafted wooden chests with gold overlay are known from the time of Tutankhamen and earlier (ANEP, nos 318, 548) and need cause no incredulity when set in the context of Israelite handiwork following the exodus from Egypt.

On top of the ark was the gold *kapporet* or “mercy-seat,” flanked by two gold cherubim (see CHERUBIM) with outstretched wings. In the later temple of Solomon the ark was placed between two much more massive cherub figures (1 K. 6:19, 23ff; 8:6), a fact which does not prove that there were no cherubim on the ark itself, or even that those cherubim, which according to Ex. 25:19 were found on the ark, were nothing else than those of Solomon’s days transferred in imagination to an earlier period. Excavations from Syria-Palestine have uncovered a variety of symbolic winged creatures from the late 2nd and early 1st millennium B.C. (ANEP, nos 644–659).

III. Contents

Unbroken tradition in the pentateuchal narratives (including both the so-called P and D sources) affirms that from the beginning the ark served as a container for the tables of the law (Ex. 25:16; 40:20; Dt. 10:5; 1 K. 8:9). Arguments of older critics who felt that the receptacle concept of the ark was incompatible with the idea of the ark as a dwelling place or throne for Yahweh have now been set aside by evidence from the ancient Near East (cf. deVaux, p. 301) showing that the covenant or treaty was often placed beneath the feet of a god who served as witness to it. In similar form, the Ten Words form the basis for the covenant of which the ark was the symbol. Note that the common Deuteronomic term “ark of the covenant” is replaced in Exodus by the term “ark of the testimony,” similarly a reference to the tables of the law as covenant witnesses.



Relief of Torah shrine (ark of the law) from second-century A.D. Jewish catacomb at Beth Shearim (Consulate General of Israel in New York)

Additional objects within the ark were but two. According to Ex. 16:33f a pot of manna was to be placed “before the Lord” or “before the testimony” as a witness throughout the generations. Nu. 17 furnishes evidence that Aaron’s rod was similarly placed “before the testimony,” this time as a sign for would-be rebels in Israel; and He. 9:4 confirms the tradition that the testimony spoken of in both passages was, or became, the law tablets within the ark of the covenant.

IV. Names

Over twenty different designations appear with reference to the ark, and discerning any invariable pattern in usage is difficult. Certainly the long narratives of Exodus in which directions are given for the tabernacle favor the designation “ark of the testimony” or simply “the ark.” The so-called Deuteronomic term “ark of the covenant of the Lord” is uniformly

used in Deuteronomy, but also appears in the very old “Song of the Ark” passage of Nu. 10:33–35 (JE). Joshua seems to use “ark of the covenant of the Lord” and “ark of the Lord” indiscriminately, as do the Samuel-Kings narratives, which add frequently the term “ark of God.” Some indication of the complexity of the problem is found in an examination of Josh. 4, where the ark is mentioned seven times. It is called the “ark of the Lord” (vv 5, 11), the “ark of the covenant of the Lord” (vv 7, 18), the “ark of the covenant” (v 9), the “ark” (v 10), and the “ark of the testimony” (v 16). The last designation is especially significant, as it appears nowhere else outside of the pentateuchal narratives claimed for the P document, and is considered a clear mark of P.

V. Origin

Nineteenth-century scholarship produced various suggestions concerning the ark’s origin, including the view that it was a shrine taken over by Israel from the Canaanites after the entry into Palestine. Another theory saw in the ark an ancient palladium of the tribe of Ephraim which was only at a later period recognized by all Israel. Contemporary scholarship recognizes that the Mosaic connection with the ark, deeply embedded in each of the traditions (cf. Ex. 25; Nu. 10:33–36; Dt. 10), must reflect the situation in the desert, confirming the Bible’s own testimony that the ark accompanied the children of Israel from Sinai onward.

VI. Significance

The ark has been variously interpreted as (1) the extension or embodiment of the presence of Yahweh; (2) a war palladium of Israel’s amphictyony; (3) a container for the tables of the law; and (4) a portable throne for the invisible presence of Yahweh. We have already shown that the container idea is both original and compatible with other concepts put forth. Proposal (2) is favored in light of texts such as 1 S. 4 and 2 S. 11:11 which show that the ark was taken into battle in order to enlist the divine help. Note also the word of Moses which he spoke when the ark was taken up to be

carried: “Arise, O Lord, and let thy enemies be scattered” (Nu. 10:35). However, nothing of what we know or presuppose concerning the form and contents of the ark points to an original military purpose, and in other statements concerning the ark a much more general significance is assigned to it. The importance of the ark for Israel in connection with her wars is only the outcome of the significance as the symbol of the presence of Yahweh, a God whose presence was necessary if His people were to be victorious in their struggle.

Proposals (1) and (4) may be taken together, as both refer to the deeply rooted idea that the ark somehow meant Yahweh was present. The throne concept has arisen from the epithet of Yahweh of Hosts who is “enthroned upon the cherubim” (1 S. 4:4; 2 S. 6:2; 2 K. 19:15; etc.). In postexilic times it was promised that Jerusalem itself would be the throne of Yahweh, a fact that would render the ark superfluous (Jer. 3:16f); and in the prophecy of Ezekiel it is specifically said that the temple is both throne and footstool for the Lord (Ezk. 43:7). Much was made of this material, and parallels have been drawn from various areas of the ancient Near East in which empty thrones were a part of the sacred furnishings of a temple. However, inasmuch as the ark in the OT is always described as an ark (Lat *arca*, “chest”) and never as a throne or seat, it seems best to take these references to a throne in a somewhat figurative sense. What is clear is that the ark was designed to be a symbol of the presence of God in the midst of His people. When the people were to leave the mountain where God had caused them to realize His presence (Ex. 30:6), the ark was made to serve as a comfortable assurance that He would indeed accompany them on the journey. In Ex. 25:21f, God promised to meet with Moses and to speak with him from above the *kappōret*, between the two cherubim upon the ark. When Israel in the time of Eli was overpowered by the Philistines, the Israelites sent for the ark in order that Yahweh should come into the camp of Israel, and this was also believed to be the case by the Philistines (1 S. 4:3ff). After the ark had come to Beth-shemesh and a pestilence had broken out there, the people did not want to keep the

ark, because no one could live in the presence of Yahweh, this holy God (1 S. 6:20). Jeremiah says (3:16f) that an ark of the covenant would not be made again after the restoration, because the city itself, as God's throne, would guarantee the presence of God at least as much as the ark formerly did.

In all the discussion it is foolish to press the aspect of physical presence to great lengths. That Yahweh was present with His people is clear from the texts. But that Yahweh was confined to the ark runs counter both to Hebrew notions about the nonspatial nature of God, and to the explicit statements of Scripture which, dating from the same times, mention God dwelling in many places both within and outside of Canaan. The statement of Moses, "Arise, O Lord, and let thy enemies be scattered" (Nu. 10:35), is not the command addressed to those who carry the ark to lift it up and thereby elevate Yahweh for the journey, but is a demand made upon Yahweh, in accordance with His promise, to go ahead of Israel as the ark does. According to 1 S. 4:3 the Israelites did not say, "We want to go and get the Lord," but "We want to go and get the ark of the Lord, that he may come among us." They accordingly wanted only to induce Him to come by getting the ark. This, too, the priests and the soothsayers of the Philistines say: "Do not send away the ark of the God of Israel empty [i.e., without a gift]" (1 S. 6:3), but they do not speak as though they really thought Yahweh was Himself confined therein. That Samuel, who slept near the ark, when he was addressed by the Lord did not at all originally think that the Lord was addressing him, proves that at that time the view did not prevail that He was in the ark or had His seat upon it. Ancient Israel was therefore evidently of the conviction that the ark was closely connected with Yahweh, and that something of His power was inherent in the ark; consequently the feeling prevailed that when near the ark they were in a special way in the presence of the Lord. But this is something different from the opinion that the ark was, in the very literal sense, a seat or dwelling place of Yahweh. Ancient man was not conscious to the extent we are of the difference between the symbolic presence and the literal reality, but

that this difference was felt is not a matter of doubt.

That the ark was built to embody the presence of God among His people seems equally clear from each one of the supposed documents of the documentary theory, though the tables of the law, rather than Yahweh Himself, constituted the contents of the ark. What would have been better adapted to make the presence of God felt as a reality than the stone tables with the Ten Words, through which the Lord had made known to His people His ethical character? For the words on these tables were a kind of spiritual portrait of the God of Israel, who could not be pictured in a bodily form, but whose living, holy presence was a vital element in His people's daily life.

W. LOTZ
M. G. KYLE
C. E. ARMERDING