

The Ark of the Covenant

Joshua 3:1-17

All that most of us know about the ‘ark of the covenant’ we learned from Indiana Jones and ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ (for those who are old enough to remember the adventure film, or have seen it in TV re-runs)! Not so for ancient Jews. The ark of the covenant – a small wooden box, which should not be confused with the big wooden boat that was Noah’s ark – appears over one hundred and fifty times in the Old Testament (though only twice, in passing, in the New Testament, for a reason to be explained below). The ark is the focus of Joshua 3, as well as several other Old Testament passages. But its roots run even deeper, back to the garden of Eden.

Day 1: Genesis 2-3 The presence of the Lord lost

Life in the earliest days of creation was idyllic. Adam and Eve enjoyed an intimate relationship with God, and with each other, in the midst of a lush garden, with a fulfilling life and a rewarding vocation, filling the earth with progeny and serving as God’s vice-regents over all creation. A moment’s rebellion shattered all that. A desire to be independent from God (3:5) led to sin and the fall. In consequence, their paradise was shattered. Disharmony spread through all dimensions of life: alienation from God, exclusion from Eden, conflict between them and among their offspring, and frustration in their labors, as well as in their oversight of the earth.

It is their alienation from God and their exclusion from Eden which connects with the ark of the covenant. That first sin erected a barrier between God and his people. From then on, they could no longer have warm communion with God and easy proximity to him. They could not approach him: Eden was walled off by frightening cherubim and a flaming sword. Nor could he approach them, lest his holiness reduce them to ashes. This is one of the core losses brought about by the fall, one of the core problems that the rest of the Bible – including the ark of the covenant – seeks to solve.

Day 2: Exodus 25 The ark of the covenant, where God’s feet touch the earth

The central problem for a loving and holy God is how to engage his sinful people: he longs to dwell in their midst, but he cannot, lest they vaporize in his presence. The Old Testament book of Exodus sets out God’s solution: the tabernacle, the boundaried presence of God. God is present among his people in the tabernacle, but they are kept outside, at a safe distance: “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them” (25:8). This is a dangerous and delicate maneuver. God provides detailed directions: “Make this

tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you” (25:9). The Jews take this warning seriously: the rest of the book of Exodus – an entire fifteen chapters – first sets out God’s precise directions for the tabernacle and its furnishings, and then closely monitors the craftsmen as they carry it out.

The first directive, even before the building of the tabernacle (tent) itself, is to construct the ark of the covenant. It is to be a chest of acacia wood, about four feet long and two feet wide and high, overlaid inside and out with gold, with four feet, and a ring on each foot for a pole, so that the ark could be carried from place to place without being touched. This chest was arguably the most sacred object in ancient Israel, containing the tablets of Ten Commandments which Moses received on Sinai.

Given its shape, and the Old Testament portrait of God enthroned in heaven, scholars widely agree that the ark of the covenant is God’s footstool, the place where his presence comes into contact with the earth. Because of its holiness, the ark is to be kept in the Most Holy Place, the holiest part of the tabernacle, doubly separated from the people by the curtain and the tent. In this way, the holy God could live among a sinful people without corrupting his purity or vaporizing them. The ark drives home the holiness of God, his desire to be among his people, and the safeguards necessary for a sinful people to be in proximity to a holy God.

Day 3: Joshua 3 The ark as the presence and power of God

The ark of the covenant is front and center in Joshua 3, appearing nine times in seventeen verses. The ark is the presence of God in their midst. As such, they must not venture too close, but are to remain a half-mile distant at all times (3:4). Carried on poles by the priest, the ark guides the people on their way into the land (3:3). As the priests step into the river, the water parts, just as the Red (or Reed) Sea parted when Moses led the people out of Egypt a generation earlier. Just as God delivered Israel out of Egypt and through the sea, so he now delivers Israel through the Jordan River and into the Canaan. Just as God was with Moses, so he is with Joshua (3:7). And in both instances, his presence also entails his power exercised on their behalf. By this act, God demonstrates that he will fight for Israel, and drive out the inhabitants, so that they can take possession of the land (3:10).

The event unfolded exactly as God said. The priests entered the shallows of the river, the water stacked up, and the entire people marched through on dry ground. It was only the first step in their occupation of the land, but it was a promissory note and a confidence booster that the rest would follow in due course. His presence and power delivered them from Egypt and through the sea. His presence and power led them through the Jordan River and into

Canaan. Both events promise that his presence and power will drive out the Canaanite peoples, and settle Israel in the land.

Day 4: 1 Samuel 4-6 The presence and power of God cannot be manipulated

Some generations later, when Samuel the prophet was just a youth, Israel was locked in a series of cross-border raids with the Philistines. After a particularly disastrous battle in which they lost 4,000 soldiers, the Israelite army went to the tabernacle to obtain the ark of the covenant, and brought it into battle with them. Nevertheless, they met disaster: 30,000 soldiers died, the ark was captured by the Philistines, and Israel's leading priest died along with his two sons. The priest's daughter-in-law went into labor and died giving birth. Her last act was to name her newborn son 'Ichabod' (meaning, 'no glory'), signifying that "the glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." The ark is the presence and power of God: as such, it can convey blessing; at the same time, it is under the control of neither man nor nation.

The Philistines expect this to be the end of the story: they have won a decisive victory over Israel, and captured the locus of God's presence. But the story continues in surprising fashion. The ark is the presence and power of the one true God. So when the Philistines put the ark in the temple of their god Dagon, the next morning they find that their god idol is prostrate before the ark, in a position of submission. They set him back up, but the next morning, they find him not only prostrate but broken into pieces before the ark. The disaster within the temple is accompanied by even greater disaster in the city. As they move the ark from one city to the next, disaster follows along. Finally, they cry in despair: "'Send the ark of the god of Israel away; let it go back to its own place, or it will kill us and our people'" (5:11). The ark is the presence and power of God: it cannot be manipulated by his people, or mocked by his enemies.

Day 5: 1 Kings 8 The ark and the temple

The ark remains in its tent until the reign of King Solomon. With God's permission, Solomon builds a permanent structure for worship. When the temple construction is complete, he installs the ark in the inner sanctuary, the Most Holy Place. There it remains in the midst of his people, but protected from them (and them, from it). Crucial to note: once the ark is installed in the temple, and the priests who carried it had withdrawn, "the cloud [of God's presence] filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the temple" (8:10-11). The ark is the presence and the power of God, holy and unapproachable, dwelling in the midst of – but at a healthy distance from – his people, and from even their holy priests.

Solomon is aware of the irony intrinsic to the ark: "Will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (8:27). Still, it was God himself who had said, "My name shall be there" (8:29). So it becomes the place that Israel goes to meet God in Jerusalem, and the place toward which they pray when they are away from the city: "Hear the supplication ... of your people Israel when they pray toward this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive" (8:30). The God whom heaven cannot contain dwells on earth, in the temple, and the ark is his footstool, the place where heaven touches earth.

Day 6: Acts 1:1-8 Where is the ark today?

At some time and in some place unknown, the ark disappears into the voids of history. Perhaps the Babylonians carted it away with the rest of the temple accoutrements when they conquered Jerusalem and razed the temple, but the biblical text does not say so (2 Kings 25 notes the confiscation of pillars, lamp stands, pots, shovels, ladles, censers, and bowls, but says nothing about the ark). Perhaps, as one stream of Jewish tradition claimed, some faithful Jews hid the ark as the Babylonian army approached the city, only for knowledge of its hiding place to be lost to future generations (including Indiana Jones). Notably, whatever its final destiny, its loss did not worry the prophet Jeremiah. Instead, he looked forward to a glorious future, when the people would be holy, and so could live in direct relationship with God. A relationship with God as wife to husband, so direct and intimate that there will no longer be need for the mediated relationship of temple or ark: "Men will no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the Lord.' It will never enter their minds or be remembered; it will not be missed, nor will another one be made. At that time ... all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the Lord" (Jer 3:16-17).

So what takes the place of the ark today? What mediates the presence and the power of God? The Spirit of God. In Acts 1, Luke tweaks Jeremiah's promise, then records its fulfillment. Instead of summoning the nations to Jerusalem, Jesus calls his disciples to go out from Jerusalem to the nations. Toward that end, he promises them his presence and his power through his indwelling Spirit (1:8). The presence of the Spirit transforms us into the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16-17). The power of the Spirit works through our preaching to bring the nations to faith. From the time of Christ's resurrection, the ark is no longer missed because its functions are fulfilled by the Spirit who conveys the presence and power of God to his people, and through them, to the rest of the world. So, just as Joshua urged his generation forward, to follow the ark through the river Jordan and into the promised land, so Jesus urges us forward, to follow the Spirit into the nations.