

THE COFFER AND ITS COVER: THE TREASURE CHEST OF GOD

In a gods-filled, ungodly world, YHWH took the divine initiative to attract the attention of His people by declaring Himself and making Himself known through the gracious image of salvation—the tabernacle’s Ark of the Covenant. The splendour of this most precious religious object, so revered by the ancient Israelites, portrays a holy purpose, presence, and pattern prefiguring the person of Jesus Christ, who is mirrored again in the church and in the believer. In the structure of the biblical world, in which the past offers a picture of the future and a challenge to the present and a hope of what is yet to come, the coffer looked forward in messianic expectation, and found again its reflection in our own past, present, and future.

It was on Mount Sinai that God detailed for Moses His tabernacle plans for a dwelling place among His people, and central was the description of the Ark—a box intended for the storage of a treasure (Exod. 25). This chest was rather small (3¾ by 2¼ by 2¼ feet) and built of acacia wood—probably the genus of thorny desert bush that had burned before Moses.¹ Overlaid with sheets of costly gold, the box supported a lid of pure hammered gold surmounted by two golden cherubim reminiscent of the Eden guardianship—a startling artistic composition in that dry and meagre desert society. The materials for the Ark—indeed, for the whole of the tabernacle—were collected only from people with willing hearts (Exod. 25:2), who offered their profane Egyptian plunder to be sanctified in its reworking. Sanctifying, too, was the placement of the Ark within the graduated holiness of the tabernacle (with its outer walls of goat hair and wood, courtyard fixtures of bronze and copper, embroidered fabric curtains and increasing use of

¹ James Strong, *The Tabernacle of Israel: Its Structure and Symbolism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1987), 147.

gold the farther in the priest entered), for “by its position of priority [the Ark] was clearly regarded as the most important of Israel’s sanctuary furnishings.”²

The purpose of the Ark as a container would have been evident to the Israelites; in it were stored the treasured tablets of covenant, surely recalling to the people the prevalent custom of their day among the nations of “placing documents and agreements between the kingdoms ‘at the feet of’ the gods . . . who supervised their implementation” (Exod. 40:20; also see 1 Sam. 10:25).³ Biblical poets picked up on this pagan imagery, and the coffer was later called the “footstool” of God (Ps. 99:5; 132:7-8). (Aaron’s rod and the jar of manna were listed in Num. 17:10 and Exod. 16:33-34 as coffer contents in pre-temple days, but some commentators intimate that they were not its primary freight.⁴) The ornate cover or lid (*kapporeth*) has been assigned the purpose of atonement (*kippur*) scripturally as well as etymologically because of its association with the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16); in fact, the Septuagint translates *kapporeth* as “propitiatory” (Exod. 25:17).⁵ But even in their days of desert wanderings, the Israelites saw the coffer and cover at least as container of the precious contents: the Decalogue, that covenant of relationship cut between God and humans, those Ten Words spoken verbally to His people. The making of the Ark effected an advance in divine-human relations, although “barriers still existed between God and the people.”⁶ The initiation of the priestly rites of atonement cleansed the camp of the Israelites in a Passover-like blood-marking, even the vessel of the Ark being subjected to this cleansing, so that through the High Priest the Israelites could approach in worship the God of the *shekinah* hovering over the purification cover, His throne (Lev. 16:2).

² Ronald E. Clements, *Exodus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972), 164.

³ *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1972 ed., s.v. “Ark of the Covenant.”

⁴ Ada R. Habershon, *The Study of the Types: Priests and Levites, A Type of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1974), 63.

⁵ Umberto M.D. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 332.

⁶ T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 3.

And, after all, this presence of God within the camp was His own stated aim in instituting the Ark of the Covenant (Exod. 29:46). The Creator who had walked in Eden now walked in the tabernacle (Gen. 3:8; Lev. 26:11-12); the “God who spoke to the assembled people amid thunder, fire, and trembling earth at Sinai” underwent “a remarkable shrinking and intimating process.”⁷ Although the Ark had more than a single use or a single symbolic meaning, its most important aspect was its connection with the presence of YHWH.⁸ Even the fact of the staves being fixed into the rings of the Ark for carriage showed that God intended to “accompany them on their way, and to be ever present with them.”⁹ YHWH placed His name on this people, calling them His very own treasured possession (Exod. 6:7; Deut. 7:6; 26:18; 1 Sam. 12:22; Isa. 43:1). His house also bore its name—this house in which His people, guilty of having set up idols in their hearts, were called to heart worship and yet in which, too often, their worship was made up only of rules taught by men (Jer. 7:10; Ezek. 14:3; Isa. 29:13). Still, the holy presence, which was concentrated at the “appointment-meeting” between the winged sphinxes above the purgation cover protecting the words of testimony, faithfully stood as a pattern given to idolatrous man, a covenant of relationship “with us here today” (Deut. 5:3).

And so the sanctuary became for the people the centre of worship.¹⁰ The building plans outlined and implemented in Exodus unveiling God’s pattern for the dwelling, with its covenantal treasure at the centre, were given to teach: “These chapters are theological in their origin, theological in their statement, and theological even in their arrangement . . . [an] interlocked sequence of events.”¹¹ The Ark can be seen as a type, “an object which by its very

⁷ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, vol. 2 of *The Schocken Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 394.

⁸ John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 358.

⁹ Henry W. Soltau, *The Holy Vessels and Furniture of the Tabernacle* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971), 29.

¹⁰ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, “Sanctuary Theology in the Book of Exodus,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 24 (Summer 1986): 127-145.

¹¹ Durham, 353.

nature and significance prefigures or foreshadows some later event, person or object.”¹² The Ark, as a picture of the sanctuary, is a pattern congruent with the nature of God, and was a type of salvation available to the Old Testament believer who came before God’s presence by the prescribed procedure.

The Saviour fulfilled the tabernacle metaphor and the picture of the Ark within, in which the compounding of wood with gold has been “taken to represent the twofold nature of our Lord, the human and the Divine.”¹³ Jesus Christ, in whom dwells all the fullness of deity, was the Righteous One whom the prophets foretold (Col. 2:9; Isa. 53; Jer. 23:5)—the same prophets who spoke of a time when the Ark would “no longer be needed because of the righteousness of the people.”¹⁴ The Psalmist called God’s tabernacle an earthly “dwelling” and the same word came to be used to designate the human body (Ps. 26:8; 2 Pet. 1:13-14). John used the imagery for the incarnate *logos*, Christ’s “tabernacling” describing the significance of the Incarnation (John 1:14). “The verb is a play on words that embraces both ‘flesh’ and ‘glory’ . . . Therefore tabernacle imagery is uniquely able to portray the person of Jesus as the locus of God’s Word and glory among humankind.”¹⁵

But further to Christ’s role as the new tabernacle, He who gives full access to God looks remarkably like the Ark itself. All of the tabernacle’s components were sacred, but the Ark is the most frequently alluded to in Scripture, full of spiritual teaching as it led God’s people into wilderness and enemy territory, through the waters of the Jordan and ’round the walls of Jericho. Its characteristics bespoke deity in empirical terms—this vessel of the covenant tablets, this

¹² D.F. Payne, “Typology, Biblical,” *The New International Dictionary of the Church*, ed. J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 990.

¹³ Habershon, 62.

¹⁴ Isidore Singer, ed., *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. II (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1975), 104.

¹⁵ Craig R. Koester, *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature and the New Testament*, CBQMS 22 (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1989), 20, 102.

throne of grace and cover of atonement, this meeting place with man. The Ark, more than any other object in the tabernacle, “seems to foreshadow the Lord Jesus”; the Ark was “the place where the tables of stone were safely deposited . . . reminding us of Him of whom it is said, ‘Thy law is within my heart’—the only place where it has been kept unbroken.”¹⁶ The old Abrahamic-Mosaic covenant has been “renewed”—made new—not only in Christ but also within the church, the recipient of the new covenant. The echoing prophecies of the law to be put into the minds and written on the hearts of the people also sound familiar to New Testament readers, into whose hearts have been placed the deposit of the Holy Spirit (Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 11:18-20; 2 Cor. 1:22; Hebrews 8:10). As Christ was the fulfillment of the Ark that held the testimony of the covenant, so the church (and the individual Christian) is now its continuance.

Christ is our new pattern, but His similarity to the Ark of the Covenant affords an illustration that can enrich our understanding—if not handled incorrectly (as for example by Philo, in his extravagant allegorical interpretations). The writer of Hebrews reiterated the beautiful patterns of temple imagery. Origen’s typology found, in the heavenly tabernacle of Moses (Exod. 25:40), a correspondence to earthly tabernacles—in the wilderness, in the temple, in the church—holding that “the ‘shadow’ of the temple points forward typologically to the ‘image’ of the church.”¹⁷ Wycliff’s view of allegory would not have been high, as he left little room for “the sufficiency of the individual in scriptural interpretation,” denying that intellect comes before the will of the submissive reader; yet even he reminded us that “the ultimate function of the Bible’s words is merely instrumental—to lead us within the shell or husk of language (*cortex verborum*) so that we may come in turn to the object of that language—a

¹⁶ Habershon, 62-63.

¹⁷ James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 180.

relationship to the Word as personal knowledge.”¹⁸ Jean Calvin wrote, “Allegories ought not to go beyond the limits set by the rule of Scripture, let alone suffice as the foundations for any doctrines.”¹⁹ By and large, with warnings against fanciful misreading, the formative writings of church theology have left some room for interpreting the Ark of the Covenant as a pattern not only of Christ but of the individual Christian in the church today.

What constitutes worship, after all, is not simply actions but heart attitudes. Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman by the well concerning the day Jerusalem’s temple would not be the site of worship; rather, He said, worship would take place in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-24). “Not church buildings, but we ourselves are temples of God,” Calvin declared triumphantly, for God does not dwell in temples made with hands (Isa. 66:1; Acts 7:48-49; 1 Cor. 3:16-17).²⁰ Believers are the habitation of God; we are His house, living stones built together, a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit (Heb. 3:6; 1 Pet. 2:5; Eph. 2:22; Eph. 2:20-22). God’s dwelling is within His people, who have treasured His words in their hearts, His name now given even to the Gentiles (Ps. 119:11; Acts 15:17). From out of all nations God has called a people for His very own on whose foreheads He would write His holy name, as He commanded His name to be attached to the turban of the high priest (Titus 2:14; Exod. 39:30-31; Rev. 22:4). He who was prefigured in the offering has become our peace (Eph. 2:14). The writer of Hebrews, for his part, “did not seem to make an identification between the true tabernacle in heaven and the community of the redeemed.”²¹ In fact, the New Jerusalem of John’s vision included no temple in heaven because “the Lord Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev. 21:22).

¹⁸ David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 175-176, 181.

¹⁹ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.5.19, ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 339.

²⁰ Calvin, 3.20.30, 893.

²¹ David J. McLeod, “The Cleansing of the True Temple,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (January-March 1995): 60-71.

God's investment in the peoples of the earth—in the coffer of the church—serves the same purpose as His tabernacle-temple involvement: He wills to show the holiness of His name by purging His house—our hearts—from impurities and idols (Ezek. 36:26-29). The Levitical cleansing by atonement sacrifice has been completed, once and for all, in Christ our Passover (Lev. 16; Rom. 3:25; 6:10; I Cor. 5:7). It is at the *kapporeth* that “justice has been satisfied, and mercy can rejoice against judgement.”²² No sacrifice for sin is left, no barrier to God's presence, because he has opened a new and living way through the curtain that previously separated us, making us holy and allowing us to draw near (Heb. 10:19-22). “The necessity of a physical tabernacle has passed away because God now dwells with His people in the hearts and bodies of the believing community, through the inhabiting of the Holy Spirit.”²³ The contents of the new Ark are no longer tablets of stone but tablets of living hearts upon which God has inscribed His new covenantal relationship, placing within this coffer the Spirit to move us to follow His decrees and laws (Ezek. 36:27). For the container that holds the treasure holds the heart, and the New Testament container—no longer acacia and gold—is merely a jar of clay showing even more clearly the all-surpassing power from God (Matt. 6:21; 2 Cor. 4:7).

The picture of the glorious, gold, Old Testament treasure chest has been transformed into the Body of Christ (and again into the individual bodies within), its material freely and willingly contributed, the Christian's reasonable service (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:18). This new coffer is set within the most holy place of the true tabernacle set up by the Lord beneath the throne of grace (Heb. 8:1-2; Heb. 4:16), “the place where this holy God dealt with the sin problem.”²⁴ Mount Sinai's graduated holiness was represented in the model of the tabernacle—its cloudy summit seen again in the holy of holies, its less restricted section in the holy place, its base with the

²² Soltau, 27.

²³ Ian Hart, “Preaching on the Account of the Tabernacle,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 54 (1982): 111-116.

²⁴ Rodriguez, 127-145.

fenced-off altar in the courtyard.²⁵ In the same way, the tabernacle is modelled in the Ark, and the Ark in Christ, and Christ in believers—picture within picture. Surely “there is something to be learned about the new by looking at and understanding the old [which] is an un illustration of the new, and because of this conceptual relationship, the readers’ understanding of both their age and the age gone by can be enhanced.”²⁶ Sometimes “the text is as much message as description.”²⁷

In a gods-filled, ungodly world, YHWH is *still taking* the divine initiative to attract the attention of His people by declaring Himself and making Himself known through the gracious image of salvation—the tabernacle’s Ark of the Covenant, recast in Jesus Christ and mirrored again in the church and in the believer. His holy purpose, presence, pattern, and person remain unchanged. The treasure chest of God turns out to be the Body of Christ, in which he has placed the most holy, precious object: the new covenant inscribed on the tablets of our hearts.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Steve Stanley, “Hebrews 9:6-10: The ‘Parable’ of the Tabernacle,” *Novum Testamentum* 37 (October 1995): 385-399.

²⁷ Fox, 395.