

THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

The Ark of the testimony was the chief piece of furniture in the tabernacle. It was a chest. In Hebrew the word for this “Ark” was a different word from the one for Noah’s Ark, and from the basket where Moses was placed as a baby in the Nile. It was 2½ x 1½ x 1½ cubits, made of acacia wood and overlaid inside and outside with pure gold. A rim of gold encircled it at the top. On each side at the bottom there were two golden rings. Poles of acacia wood covered with gold were put through these rings so that Levites of the family of Kohath could carry it. On solemn occasions priests carried it.

It was covered by a lid of solid gold, called the “mercy seat” or “the atonement cover:” Two cherubim of gold stood on the cover, of one piece with the mercy seat, one on each side, spreading their wings so as to overshadow it. They were symbols of the presence of the Lord. There the LORD dwelt in the midst of His people.

The Ark was made especially to hold the two tablets of the Law. God Himself had written His Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. The popular custom of calling commandments I-III “the first table” and commandments IV-X “the second table” is mistaken. When people of old made a covenant, as when people sign an important document today, each party kept a copy. There were two full sets of the Ten Commandments, God’s copy, and the people’s copy, and both were kept in the Ark of the Covenant.

Later Aaron’s rod that budded, a pot of manna, and the Book of the Law were placed alongside the Ark. Apparently these were removed during times of confusion (1 Kng 8:9).

When the Israelites left Mount Sinai, the Ark was carried in front of them. When they crossed the Jordan, the priests stood on the riverbed with the Ark, where the water had stopped flowing, although it was a time of flood, while the people crossed over. It was carried around Jericho *for* seven days before God caused the walls of the city to fall down. The Israelites first kept it at Gilgal, and then at Shiloh. In Eli’s time the sons of Eli took it onto the battlefield, as if it had the power to bring a wonderful victory against the Philistines, but it was captured. Every Philistine city that kept it had dreadful plagues, until the Philistines sent it back to Israel, pulled by several cows, who forgot all about their young calves as they pulled it off towards Israelite territory.

At Beth-Shemesh, the inhabitants looked into the Ark, and they were punished. Then the Ark was kept at Kiriath-Jearim. David chose thirty thousand men to bring the Ark to Jerusalem on a cart, with great celebration. However, when the oxen stumbled, Uzzah put out his hand to steady the Ark, and the Lord struck him dead. The Ark then remained at the house of Obed-Edom for three months, and God blessed him and his whole family.

From there the Ark was taken to Jerusalem, this time carried by priests and Levites. They put it in a tent that David had pitched for it. Later the Ark was placed in the Holy of holies in the temple that Solomon built. The last reference to the Ark in the Old Testament is 2 Chron 35:3, at the time of Josiah, king of Judah, about 623 BC. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586, but there is no mention of the Ark of the Covenant among the vessels from the temple that Nebuchadnezzar carried off to Babylon.

The Hebrew word for the mercy seat was *Kipporeth*. Leviticus 16 gives the procedure of the Day of Atonement. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies and sprinkled blood on the mercy seat, to make atonement. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the “Septuagint”, the word *hilastērion* is used for the mercy seat. It actually means “the propitiation.” In Romans 3:24-26 Paul uses this word directly of Christ, so it is appropriate for Christians to think of Jesus Christ Himself as their mercy-seat: *“They are declared righteous freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God publicly displayed Him as the mercy seat (OR atonement cover”, Greek *hilastērion*) through faith in His blood. God did this to show His righteousness, because, in His patience, He had left unpunished those sins that had been done in the past. He wanted to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be righteous, and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus.*

The same word *hilastērion* is used in Hebrews 9:5: *“Above it were the angels of glory overshadowing the mercy seat {Greek *hilastērion*; and in 1 John 2:2 the related word *hilasmos* is used directly of Jesus: “He is the “propitiation (OR atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world.” Though the Law of God accuses us of sin, and cries out for God to punish us, His wrath is appeased through the sacrificial blood of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. This helps to explain the meaning of Jesus’ death. Hebrew 9:15 reads: “For this reason He is the Mediator of a new covenant. By dying He paid the ransom to free people from the sins under the first covenant. He has done this so that those who are called may receive the promise of an eternal inheritance.”*

Jonathan Gray recently claimed that the Ark of the Covenant has been found in a tunnel, about 20 feet

directly below the place of Jesus' crucifixion. The earthquake when Jesus died opened up a crack in the rock directly below. The blood from when the soldier pierced Jesus' side fell directly onto the Ark of the Covenant below, which had been hidden by the Jews in 586 BC. If all this is true, we can only marvel at how God has brought a series of things together. The place where Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac is also the place where the Ark of the Covenant was hidden, directly below the "place of the skull" where Jesus was crucified.

The Israelis face terrific problems if this is so. Radical elements would try to gain possession of the Ark and assume that, with it in their control, God would help them to overcome all obstacles. Obviously, for these reasons, the Israelis must keep its discovery out of the media, at least in such a way that radical elements do not try to destroy the mosque called the Dome of the Rock, re-erect the temple, and put the Ark inside. That would mean a massive war with the Moslems! For us, the purpose of the Ark of the Covenant has been fulfilled. Any Christian could approach it without fear. Certainly the Ten Commandments inside it are holy, written by the finger of God, but no more holy than the rest of God's inspired Word. The Israelis would not view it this way. They have no more high priests. Orthodox Jews would be afraid to look at it. Israelis could not even put it on display in a museum. All they could do is to secure it and lock it away! They would also have to come to terms with the mind-boggling claim that Jesus' blood actually fell on the "mercy seat", the "propitiation."