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### THE ARK OF THE COVENANT: A SERMON ON EXODUS 25:8–22

*by Brian Allred*

THE PASSAGE OF TIME has rendered obsolete some once essential items—things like rotary dial phones, cassette tapes, typewriters, overhead projectors, and floppy discs. Interestingly, time has also removed us from one of the most important articles in the Old Testament that once served a crucial function in God’s relationship with his people: the ark of the covenant. We first read about the ark when God was giving instructions to Moses at Sinai for how to build it in Exodus 25:8–22.

And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it. They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it. You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you. You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from

above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

I was 12 years old in 1981 when Steven Spielberg's film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* came out. At that time, I had no idea what the lost ark was. And I admit that even after watching the movie, I still didn't know what it was—let alone that it was biblical. The only ark I learned about in the Bible was Noah's ark! I suppose it's possible that many Christians unfamiliar with the Old Testament still have confused or only vague notions about the ark of the covenant. But it's important to understand some things about the ark of the covenant—not as an intriguing bit of history but because of the important and abiding truths the ark teaches us about our God as we worship him today. Indeed, our covenant God reveals *himself* to us through the instructions for the ark of the covenant. He does so in at least three ways.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. A God of Relationship

First, he reveals himself to us as a God of relationship. We can see this in verses 8–9 and verse 22. It might not seem like a God of relationship is being revealed in instructions to build a box. And the ark of the covenant is, in one sense, just that: a rectangular box about 4ft x 3ft x 3ft made of acacia wood, overlaid with pure gold with permanently fixed poles by which to carry it, along with a lid of gold and cherubim on each side of it. But we must remember that it is the ark *of the covenant*—and at the heart of a covenant is a *relationship*. We should also keep in mind that instructions to build the ark of the covenant are given in the larger context of instructions to build a tabernacle, a portable tent for the Lord, so that God might dwell with his people. God says in verse 8: “And let them make me a sanctuary, *that I may dwell in their midst*.” He is committed to living in relationship with his people.

Along with additional items revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, the ark of the covenant was to be placed inside this tent or tabernacle. There were three distinct spaces related to the tabernacle: an outer courtyard surrounding it, while the tent itself consisted of the Holy Place and then the innermost area called the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. The ark of the covenant was to reside within the Most Holy Place. In the set of instructions for the tabernacle furnishings recorded in Exodus chapters 25 through 27, the details about the ark of the covenant are listed first because it has supreme importance: it represented the presence of God in a unique way.<sup>2</sup> It was

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1. I owe the initial idea for my alliterated points to Dale Ralph Davis' comments on 2 Samuel 6, though he observes how the ark underscores God's rulership, reconciliation, and revelation. See Dale Ralph Davis, *2 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 1999), 62.

2. These chapters move from the items to be placed in the innermost area of the Most Holy Place to those items consigned to the outer areas. We also see movement from items of pure gold in the inner parts of the tabernacle to items of silver and bronze as we move outward, with gold signifying the beauty, glory, and holiness of God's presence the nearer we are to the

here—from before the ark of the covenant—that God spoke to Moses. We hear God inform Moses in verse 22: “There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.” We read something similar in Numbers 7:89: “And when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with the LORD, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim; and it spoke to him.” God spoke in covenant *relationship* from before the ark of the covenant.

He also reveals himself as a God of relationship by the items placed inside the ark of the covenant. We know from Hebrews 9:4 that within the ark was a jar of manna with which God miraculously fed the people in the wilderness and Aaron’s staff that budded.<sup>3</sup> By the manna, we learn that God relates to us as our supreme provider, and by Aaron’s rod, we understand that he relates to us through a life-generating mediator or high-priest. Both of these point us to Jesus, the true bread from heaven<sup>4</sup> and our Great High Priest.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the ark as a whole points us to Jesus. God reveals himself to us, speaks to us, and relates to us ultimately in Jesus. Relationship with God is enjoyed only by faith in him. Jesus declares in John 14:6: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” Are you in a relationship with God through faith in Jesus? Have you given your heart and life to him? Are you trusting in him as your Savior and walking with him as your King? Knowing him as king is crucial because the ark of the covenant reveals God in a second way.

## 2. A God of Rule

The ark of the covenant also reveals our God as a God of rule. In addition to the jar of manna and Aaron’s staff, the ark of the covenant also housed the testimony mentioned in verse 16. From Hebrews 9:4 as well as Exodus 31:18, we know this refers to the tablets of the ten commandments. The fact that the ark contained the commandments of God for his people reveals that he is a God of rule. But it’s important to recognize that the ten commandments give us a revelation of who God is and not merely a set of morals. How do the ten commandments give us a revelation of who God is? Think of it this way: most of the commandments are given as prohibitions (“you shall not”), but behind the prohibition is a positive moral principle, and that moral principle is based on God’s character. For example, consider the sixth commandment: “You shall not murder”—that’s the prohibition. What’s the positive moral principle? Value life, respect life, protect life. What, then, does that positive moral principle tell us about God? It tells us that our God is the God of life, the giver and protector of life.

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Most Holy Place. That the ark was to be made of gold is stressed in vv. 11–13 where gold is explicitly mentioned four times.

3. Numbers 17:1–11.

4. John 6:51.

5. Hebrews 4:14.

Because this is true, those who bear his image are called to protect life and are given the commandment not to destroy it by murdering. Take the seventh commandment: “You shall not commit adultery”—that’s the prohibition. What’s the positive moral principle? Be faithful and keep your covenant promises. Why? Because our God is a God who is faithful and keeps his covenant promises. We can take the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.” This prohibition leads us to the positive principle of offering our worship to God alone. Why? Because God alone is the true God, and he alone is worthy of our worship. We can apply this same approach to the rest of the ten commandments and discover that they each reveal something about the essence of God’s character.<sup>6</sup>

But the ark of the covenant reveals a God of rule in another way: it depicts the throne of a king. The psalmist likely has the ark of the covenant in mind when he exclaims in Psalm 99:1: “The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits *enthroned upon the cherubim*; let the earth quake!” This expression of God being *enthroned upon the cherubim* also occurs in Psalm 80:1. It is derived from the two cherubim—angelic creatures who live in God’s presence—that God ordered be made for each side of the ark in the directions given to Moses in Exodus 25:18–20:

And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be.

The ark presents God to us as the enthroned King who reigns over all. But even more specifically, the ark is regarded as his footstool. David’s words in 1 Chronicles 28:2 indicate this: “Hear me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our God.” The idea is also present in Psalm 132:7: “Let us go to his dwelling place, let us worship at his footstool,” as well as in Isaiah 60:13 when the Lord intends: “to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.” T. Desmond Alexander summarizes the significance of this well: “Understood as a footstool, the ark of the covenant extends the heavenly throne to the earth; this is where the divine king’s feet touch the earth. Consequently, the tabernacle links heaven and earth.”<sup>7</sup>

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6. That the prohibitions in the ten commandments implicitly contain positive moral principles finds support in the Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 99, when the rules for the right understanding of the commandments includes the principle that “where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, *where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded*” (emphasis added). More importantly, this is confirmed by Jesus when asked about the greatest commandment in Matthew 22:36–40. His answer cites not a negative prohibition but the positive moral principles of love for God and love for neighbor.

7. T. Desmond Alexander. *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009), 33.

Finally, consider that this tent for God was to be located in the center of the Israelite camp. The center was where the tents of the ancient kings were pitched.<sup>8</sup> Our God reveals himself to us as a God of relationship, but he enters into that relationship as a God of rule. This isn't just a historical or theological observation. It's a truth that calls for our personal submission and total allegiance to God as our King. We must remember that although we may wish to promote democracy within human governments, we ultimately live in a universe governed by an Absolute Monarch who calls us to complete obedience. Are you living in obedience and submission to God as *your* King? In the words you use, the images you look at, your actions when no one's around, in the privacy of your thoughts? Or are you rebelling against his rule by refusing to forsake your sins, by indulging sinful desires and lusts, in the anger and grudges you nurse, in the wounds you refuse to forgive, in gossiping and slandering others, in your impatience and irritability at home, in the prejudices you justify, in the fantasies you harbor, in the sacrificial love and care of others that you neglect? Are there areas in your life where you're not submitting to God that you need to give over to him?

We're called to submit our hearts and lives completely to the God of rule. But we need to confess that we don't. If you're like me, this can leave you feeling guilty and condemned. But there's good news for the guilty because the ark of the covenant reveals our God in one more way.

### 3. A God of Redemption

A third way the ark of the covenant reveals our God is as a God of redemption. Some things went inside the ark, but something important went *on top* of the ark, too. We read about it in verses 17–21: “You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. . . . And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you.”

The tablets of the law placed inside the ark of the covenant serve to expose our sinfulness, disobedience, and rebellion. As a result, our communion with our Creator is severed, and we stand condemned before him. The two cherubim serve to recall this fracturing of fellowship. We first read of cherubim in Genesis 2:24. Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden of Eden away from the presence of the Lord after sinning, and the Lord places *cherubim* and a flaming sword to bar their reentry. Because of our sinfulness, we are barred from fellowship with our Holy God and from life. Is there a way back into Paradise to once again enjoy fellowship with our Maker and live? Only if God is not only a God of rule but also a God of redemption and mercy.

And he is! There is mercy for us. A mercy seat covered the ark of the covenant.<sup>9</sup> This mercy seat was used only once a year on the Day of Atonement when the high

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8. Kenneth Kitchen, “Some Egyptian Background to the Old Testament,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 5–6, (1960), 11.

9. The Hebrew word כפרת is sometimes translated “atonement cover.”

priest would enter into the Most Holy Place and sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial Lamb on it to make atonement for the people.<sup>10</sup> Make sure you get the picture: God in his perfect righteousness looks down from his holy throne to his footstool where the covenant obligations that we transgress in thought, word, and deed call for our condemnation, separation, and death. But God beholds the blood upon the mercy seat that speaks a word of forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation. The blood of atonement has hushed the law's loud thunder. The sins of the covenant people are covered by the blood of the Lamb that provides redemption. And this precious truth is not just revealed through the ark of the covenant—it is revealed *in the gospel*. The ark of the covenant teaches us about the gospel. Indeed, our covenant God reveals himself to us through the instructions for the ark of the covenant, but he fulfills that revelation through Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world—not just those of Israel, but all who look to him by faith. When he died on the cross, the curtain that barred all but the high priest from the Most Holy Place and the presence of God was torn from top to bottom.<sup>11</sup> As a result, according to Hebrews 10:19: “we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus.” Jesus’ redeeming blood has restored our access to the holy and living God in fellowship and communion. Access to God that was once enjoyed by Adam and Eve in Eden but was lost at the fall is granted again through Jesus. Access that was once the privilege of Israel’s high priest on the Day of Atonement is now the privilege of all who trust in Jesus for salvation and forgiveness. While Satan wants to keep you *cringing* before God in the guilt, fear, condemnation, and shame of your sins, the author of Hebrews says you can be *confident* to appear in the holy presence of God in heaven, the true Holy of Holies. Why? Because we’re good enough? Because of our obedience to the law? Because of our morality or religious performance? No. We have confidence to enter the holy places “by the blood of Jesus.” You have the entry code to the gates of Paradise; you have the garage door opener, you’ve been given keys to the front door of heaven because by the blood of Jesus and through faith in him you’ve become a son or daughter of the living God to live with him in glory. You’re a member of his family. Your Father’s arms are open wide.

### Conclusion

The mystery at the center of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was the whereabouts of the ark of the covenant. Oddly, the location of such an important piece of furniture has remained unknown for centuries. Of course, there’s been no shortage of theories and legends about where the ark of the covenant is or what happened to it. But for all of the curiosity it might provoke, finding the ark of the covenant is an unnecessary pursuit for us as Christians—as unnecessary as going back to rotary phones, cassette tapes, and floppy disks. We have something better than the ark of the covenant: we know the

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10. Leviticus 16:11–16.

11. Matthew 27:51. That the curtain was torn “from top to bottom” (i.e., from the top down) symbolizes accomplishment not by human effort but by God in his power and grace.

God who revealed himself in the instructions for the ark of the covenant through the fuller revelation in Christ Jesus. We have relationship with God through faith in him, we have redemption and forgiveness of sins through his blood, and we are empowered by his grace and by thankful hearts to live obediently under his rule as our King now and forever.