

Worship by God's Design - Studies on The Tabernacle

Midweek Teaching Series

Part 3 - The Ark of the Covenant

Read: Exodus 25: 10-22

Where to begin?

Sinai is the pivotal moment for the Children of Israel. After fleeing Egypt and crossing the Red Sea, they camp at Sinai to wait on the Lord. The Sinai experience is recorded for us between Exodus chapters 19 and 32. It is a story of two parts, with both parts being almost identical. The change point in the story is what we find in chapter 32 and the worship of the golden calf. From chapters 19 to 31 God gives to Moses his plan for the Children of Israel and how they will live as his community and worship only him. Even while this is being told to Moses the people turn from trusting God and build the golden calf as the object of their worship. Following Moses' chastisement of the people they recommit themselves to the worship of God and in Exodus 33:6, following the command to leave Sinai, we are told this about the people:

Therefore the people of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

This demonstrated the intention of the people to be only for God and not for the gods of the nations around them. Moving on from Sinai the second part of the story is the record of the constructing of the Tabernacle and all its furniture. The whole book concludes in chapter 40 and verses 34-35 with this wonderful sight.

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.

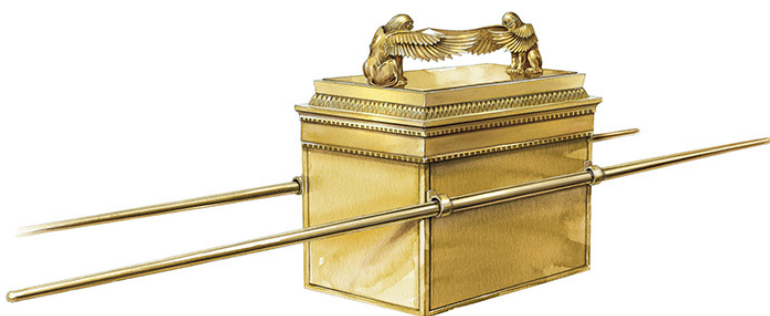
The people were faithful in their following the Lord's way. They proved their willingness to keep covenant with God and it all begins in chapter 23. Much like we saw in part 2 of this series, God only wanted those whose hearts were toward him to give to this work. In Exodus 25:2 we read,

"Speak to the people of Israel, that they take for me a contribution. From every man whose heart moves him you shall receive the contribution for me."

God requires heart worship and not lip service! This has always been God's standard in worship. Jesus affirms this in Matthew 7:21 as he says,

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

The Ark of the Covenant



God's directions for the tabernacle begin not with the tabernacle structure but with the ark of the covenant. It does not take much speculation to figure out why this is the case. The ark was perhaps the most important component of the tabernacle and its furniture and the clearest symbol of the divine presence. The Lord promised to meet His people at the ark, above its mercy seat, and when it was not being transported, the ark was placed in the Most Holy Place,

where God made His presence most felt under the old covenant. Later, in Revelation 11:19, we read about the ark in the heavenly temple and its association with signs of God's presence. God gave the plans for the ark first because it represented most concretely His dwelling among them.

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

Revelation 11:19

Exodus 25:10 tells us that the ark was a rectangular box fashioned from acacia, a strong wood that is easy to make into furniture. The measurements for the box are given in cubits, and one cubit in Moses' day was equivalent to about eighteen inches, though the length of a cubit may have been longer later in Israel's history. With this, the body of the ark was about forty-five inches long, twenty-seven inches wide, and twenty-seven inches tall. Given that the ark would be a sign of the royal divine presence, it was covered with gold, as befits God's sovereign majesty, and featured a moulding on its edges. The end result was an ornate, gold-plated chest.

When the ark was resting, its bottom did not touch the ground directly, probably to emphasise its being set apart to the Lord. It had four gold legs, each of which featured a gold ring (v.12). Through these rings were inserted two gold-covered poles made from acacia wood, one on each of the ark's long sides, for the purpose of carrying the ark. Designated Levites would lift the ark and rest the poles on their shoulders when transporting the ark. These poles were not to be removed so that there would not be any damage the ark.

Into the ark would be placed "the testimony," which later Scripture tells us was the tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments. Along with the stone tablets a jar of Manna and Aaron's rod would be included.

		OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT	SYMBOLISM
STONE TABLETS WITH TEN COMMANDMENTS		Deuteronomy 10:5	Hebrews 9:4	The stone tablets with the Ten Commandments, written by God's own hand, were to remind the people of God's holy nature (Exodus 10:1–17). Jesus said that he came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17–18).
A JAR OF MANNA		Exodus 16:32–34	Hebrews 9:4	The jar of manna reminded the people of God's constant provision (Exodus 16:32–34). Scripture says Christ is the bread of God who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world (John 6:32–35, 48–51).
AARON'S ROD		Numbers 17:10	Hebrews 9:4	Aaron's rod confirmed God's choice and anointing of Aaron as high priest. The Messiah was the chosen and anointed one (Hebrews 3:1, 4:14), just like Aaron (Numbers 17:5).

Behind the second curtain was a second section called the Most Holy Place, having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

Hebrews 9: 3-5

The Mercy Seat

The mercy seat was a lid made of pure gold placed on top of the ark. It was adorned by figures of two cherubim that stood on its surface, facing one another with their wings overshadowing the ark. Throughout the ancient Near East, creatures called cherubim appeared in religious iconography, indicating that belief in these beings was widespread even outside Israel, though pagan depictions of these creatures were obviously perversions of the truth. We do not know exactly what the cherubim looked like. The most

extended description of biblical cherubim occurs in the book of Ezekiel, where we see that the cherubim who attended the Lord's throne had features including four faces—one each of a human, an ox, an eagle, and a lion—and four wings (Ezekiel 1, 10:1).

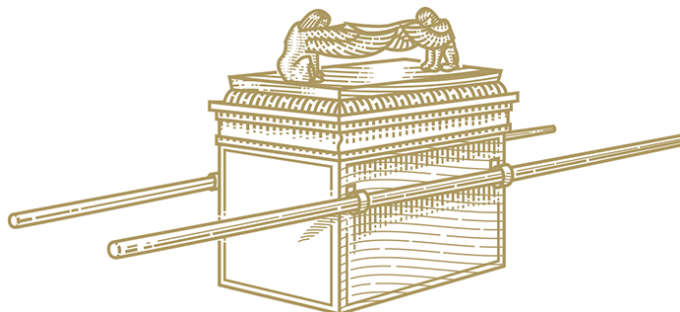
In Hebrew, the word translated in the ESV as “mercy seat” is *kapporet*, which refers to “atonement” or “reconciliation” and is related to the root word for “cover.” God pledged to meet His people at the mercy seat, which was the place of atonement, for reconciliation and cover-ing. God says to Moses in Exodus 25:22,

“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.”

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice on the mercy seat to atone for the nation's sins (Leviticus 16: 15-16). Since the lid and the winged cherubim covered the ark and the Ten Commandments within, the idea is that the blood of the atoning sacrifices sprinkled on the mercy seat covered Israel's violations of the law, shielding the people from God's wrath.

Application for Today

In part 1 of this series we acknowledged that the purpose of the Tabernacle was for God to dwell with his people and for them to be confronted by that truth in the centre of the camp. In all of the furniture to be made for the Tabernacle no piece shows this fact more than the ark of the covenant. It was to be kept in the Most Holy Place. The high priest could enter only once a year on the Day of Atonement to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice over the mercy seat, making atonement for the sins of the people.



The position and purpose of the ark tells us that we cannot meet with the Lord unafraid unless our sin has been covered by the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. The ark of the covenant was an old covenant picture of this truth and informed the Israelites that a right relationship with God comes at a cost. Many people today think that they can be at peace with God apart from an atoning sacrifice, and we must tell them that they can meet the Lord unafraid only by trusting in the sacrifice of Christ. 1 John 2: 1-3 tells us,

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.

The close association of the ark, where God was present, and the law shows us that we cannot separate the presence of God from the moral will of God. If we do not have a desire to obey the Lord's commands, we are not in a right relationship with Him. If we love Him, we will want to keep His commandments. We will not do so perfectly, and so we rest only in Christ for salvation. Nevertheless, we will want to obey Him.

Questions for Further Study

1. How do you know God's presence with you today? Think of some practical examples.
2. We no longer need a Mercy Seat because Jesus has shed his blood for us, once and for all. How is this good news for you and how can you share this good news with others?
3. How can greater understanding of the Ark of the Covenant draw you closer to God as you live for him?

Cut-Away of The Tabernacle

