

The Ark of the Covenant in Prophecy

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The Ark of the Covenant (Hebrew, ' *aron ha-brit*) was Israel's most sacred ritual object and was designed as a repository for the original tablets of the Law given at Mount Sinai and as the footstool of God at which the Shekinah Glory was manifested in the Tabernacle and the First Temple. It consisted of a box of acacia (KJV *shittim*) wood overlaid with gold (Ex. 25:10-11) approximately three and four feet in length and one and two feet in height and width. On top of the Ark was a golden lid with sculpted figures called in Hebrew "the covering" (*kapporet*), though in English translations as "the "Mercy Seat." The figures on the Mercy Seat symbolized cherubim, angelic creatures who served as guardians of God's holy Presence in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24), which appeared between their wings as stated in Exodus 25:22: "And there I will meet with you; and from above the Mercy Seat, from between the cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel." The Ark apparently served as the place between heaven (the throne between the cherubim) and earth (the place of the Temple). As the visible footstool for the invisible throne of God, it was available when He "descended" to earth, such as at Sinai, on the battlefield, or in a foreign land (Philistia). The purpose of the Ark was to enable the Presence of God to be manifested among the Israelites. For this reason – to house the Ark – the Tabernacle, Tent of Meeting, and finally the Temple, were constructed (cf. Exodus 25:8-22; 2 Chronicles 6:10-11). The Ark disappeared at the time of the destruction of the First Temple, and despite the restoration of other Temple vessels with the post-exilic return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:7-11; cf. Jeremiah 27:16-22; Isaiah 52:11-12), the Ark was mysteriously absent. This led to the development of a wide body of tradition in Jewish literature to explain its loss and eventual return.

One example of Jewish tradition respecting the Ark in a future Temple is found in one of the Dead Sea Scroll documents known as *The Temple Scroll*. In a passage describing the furnishing of the great Temple of Israel's restoration we read: "And two cherubim [you shall make at both ends of the cover, the one cherub on this end, and the othe]r end the second, spreading (their) wings [over the place of the Ark, and shielding the cover with their wings] above the Ark, with their faces on[e to the other ...]" (*11Q19* 7:10-12). If this future Temple of *The Temple Scroll* was to be legitimate it must include the Ark, as did the Tabernacle in the wilderness (and the First Temple), for only with the Ark present could the glory of God return to take its appointed place "between the wings of the cherubim" (cf. Ezek. 43:1-7). *The Temple Scroll* seems to have understood that the restoration Temple would least have included the elements of the Tabernacle and the First Temple (cf. Haggai 2:3-9). According to rabbinic literature, the ancient rabbis noted that five things from the First Temple were missing from the Second Temple, including the Ark (m. *Seqalim* 6:1-2; m. *Yoma* 5:2; t. *Yoma* 3:14; t. *Sota* 13:1; b. *Yoma* 21b; cf. *Jewish Wars* 5.5§5). The author of the *Temple Scroll* felt that only the pattern of the Tabernacle would suffice for his Temple, since he probably regarded the First Temple as having been improperly built, and the Second Temple, aside from being polluted, contained no Ark. This fact was emphasized in the extra-biblical literature (cf. 2 Macc. 2:4-5; 2 Apoc. Bar. 6:7-10), but only as a means to heighten the Ark's return as a sign of the Messianic Age. For the same reason *The Temple Scroll's* author would have included the Ark.

In biblical prophecy, its disappearance and reappearance is linked with the destiny of the Temple as well as that of national Israel as a symbol of divine discipline and restoration. In this light, Ezekiel's prophecy of the Temple's desecration and destruction was revealed by the departure of the Presence of God from the Ark and the Temple (Ezekiel 10:4-11:23). In like manner, his prophecy of the Temple's rebuilding and rededication will be revealed by the return of God's Presence to the final Temple, and presumably to the Ark within it (Ezekiel 43:1-7). In support of this is the language of the restoration of the Divine Presence in the eschatological section of Ezekiel (33-48). Between the battle of Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38:1-39:20) and the erection of the Millennial Temple (Ezekiel 40:1-48:35), Ezekiel mentions the national restoration of Israel that comes at the conclusion of the Tribulation (Ezekiel 39:21-29). In verses 21-26 God declares that He will set His "Glory" among the nations (vs. 21a), restore Israel's blessings in connection with His holy Presence (vs. 25), with the result that Israel will thereafter live securely (vs. 26b). This description seems to recall the functions of the Ark: the "Glory" attended the Ark (1 Samuel 4:21) and therefore it brought blessing to Israel (2 Samuel 6:11-12), which secured Israel in its Land (Numbers 10:33--36). If such language is intended to include the Ark, then here is an implication that it will indeed be present in the Last Days. In addition, the language of Ezekiel 43:1-7 resembles that in passages describing the Ark. In this text "the glory of God" fills the Temple (vs. 5), eliciting the divine declaration that this place is "My throne and the place of My feet, where I will dwell with the sons of Israel forever" (vs. 7). When God's glory previously filled the Temple it was said to have followed the installation of the Ark (1 Kings 8:4-12), constituting the Temple as God's throne (cf. 1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Isaiah 37:16; Psalm 80:2; 99:1) and the place where He would dwell forever with Israel (Psalm 132:7-8, 13; cf. Ezekiel 37:26-28). Where else would Ezekiel's audience have expected God's glory to have returned but to the Ark (cf. Exodus 25:22)? Would they have considered the restoration program complete if the final Temple did not have returned what the First Temple had lost? Even though the Ark is not explicitly stated to be in Ezekiel's final Temple, it seems to be implicit in other statements that require its presence to properly fulfill ritual functions such as the Day of Atonement (included in the "all My appointed feasts" of Ezekiel 44:24). Other items of Temple furniture are mentioned such as the priestly garments (Ezekiel 42:14) Altar of Burnt Offering (Ezekiel 41:22; 43:13-27) and Table of Shewbread (Ezekiel 41:22; 44:16), while others of importance are not (Altar of Incense, Menorah). The inclusion of some furniture implies the inclusion of all, since this Temple appears as a fully functioning Temple.

In keeping with Ezekiel's presentation of judgment and restoration with respect to the Temple and the Ark, the Book of Revelation reveals a similar pattern in its depiction of judgment coming from the heavenly Temple and Ark in response to the earthly desecration of the Temple in the Tribulation period. Characteristic of the Book of Revelation is the alternating depiction of events in heaven and earth in which heaven responds in increasingly severe acts of judgment to the increasing abominations of the "earth-dwellers" and the Antichrist. In this interplay between heaven and earth, Revelation 11 focuses on the city of Jerusalem and the Temple. In Revelation 11:1-2 the earthly Temple's outer court, along with the city of Jerusalem, is predicted to be "trampled underfoot" by the Antichrist (cf. Daniel 11:45). This is apparently the same event of future desecration of the Temple by the "Abomination of Desolation" prophesied by Daniel (Daniel 9:27; 12:11), Jesus (Matthew 24:15; Mark 13:14) and Paul (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). In response to this act of desecration on earth, the scene in heaven reveals God's heavenly Temple with its Ark of the Covenant (Revelation 11:19) out of which proceed divine wrath. This

correspondence may imply that the Tribulation Temple will again house the Ark that will, like the Temple itself, be subject to ritual violation. This implication of the existence of the Ark in the Tribulation Temple may find support in an examination of the act of Temple abomination described by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:4 which is based on Daniel 9:27.

In the Daniel text, the one who desecrates the Temple (the Antichrist) comes on “the wing of abominations” (verse 27). The “wing” may suggest the precise *place* where the “Abomination of Desolation” occurs - in the Holy of Holies in relation to the winged cherubim on the Ark. The mention of the sacrifices being stopped just before the explanation of the abomination further sets this act in the context of ritual violation. The epitome of desecration in the First Temple was the abomination of Manasseh, who replaced the Ark with an idolatrous image of Asherah (see 2 Kings 21:7; 2 Chronicles 33:7; compare 35:3). Paul’s further explanation of this desecration in 2 Thessalonians 2:4b is that the “man of lawlessness” (the Antichrist) will seat himself in the innermost part of the Temple as an act of divine enthronement, “displaying himself as God.” This act of self-deification in relation to the Holy of Holies would only make sense if it followed the precedent of God’s display of His Divine Presence at the Ark (Exodus 25:22; Psalm 80:1; 99:1). Numerous archaeological reliefs contain portraits of rulers sitting on winged thrones, reflecting the concept in the ancient Near East of God’s Presence being accompanied by a winged retinue or guardian cherubim. The enthronement of the Antichrist on the historic symbol of deity in Israel’s Temple would certainly conform to Satan’s desire to make himself “like the Most High”(Isaiah 14:14), and to restore his heavenly position on “the mountain of God” which formerly involved a cherubic status (Ezekiel 28:16). It may also serve as a strong delusion to an unbelieving world whose acceptance of the Antichrist as divinity will seal their spiritual doom (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12).

The Ark of the Covenant also appears in a prophetic context in Jeremiah’s prophecy of the restoration of Jerusalem in the Millennial Kingdom in Jeremiah 3:16-17. This difficult text has been variously translated based on the interpretations given to it. The King James Version reads: “And it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the Lord, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the Lord; neither shall it come to mind; neither shall they visit it; neither shall that be done any more. At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord; and all the nations shall be gathered unto it, to the name of the Lord, to Jerusalem; neither shall they walk any more after the imagination of their evil heart.” The opening words of verse 16 concerning a regathered Israel and the closing words of verse 17 describing a regenerated Israel indicate that the context of this passage is the Millennial Kingdom. Jeremiah describes the time of unease over the Ark as just prior to “those days” (verse 16), a period that may describe the Tribulation in which the desecration of the Temple will be a primary concern. However, Jeremiah’s prophecy was directed toward the apprehension of those during First Temple times who suffered the loss of the Ark. Whatever his statement implies concerning the future existence of the Ark, his point in this context is to relieve Israel’s concern that their future could not be fulfilled without the central presence of the Ark. Jeremiah’s statement concerning the Millennium is that under the New Covenant the Ark would no longer have the central importance it had under the old covenant. In that day, all of Jerusalem would serve as the Glory-bearer as a Sanctuary-city (cf. Isaiah 4:5; Ezekiel 43:12. In other words, in the Millennium the Ark will not be needed as it was previously, therefore, there should not be concern over its present fate since its loss will not prevent Israel’s final restoration.

Having said this, it should also be noted that this passage does not say that the Ark will not be present, but only that it will not function as it did under the old covenant. Jeremiah's wording is that "they will *no more* say, be concerned for, remember, visit, the Ark," suggesting that in the time before the Millennium they may have been doing these things. If the Ark reappears and is included in the rebuilt Temple of the Tribulation, pilgrimages to the place of the Ark (the Temple) will be revived. Furthermore, the Temple invasion of the place of the Divine Presence by the Antichrist will produce great concern. The phrase in this verse appearing in the KJV as "neither shall it come to mind," is better translated "neither shall it be taken to heart," This idiom means that the people should not worry about the Ark in the future as they have in the past. Read in this light the words of verse 16 are understandable.

However, the last words of verse 16 "they will not make it again" require clarification to avoid contradiction of this proposal, for as it stands in this translation it implies the Ark was destroyed and would not be remade. Therefore, the Ark could not exist in the future. However, the translation "make it again," can be rendered "use it again." The Hebrew word '*asah* usually means "to make" or "to do," but it also has may mean "to use," and significantly one of the two instances in which the verb appears with this nuance is in a context concerning the materials "used" in the construction of the Ark (Exodus 38:24; cf. 1 Samuel 8:16). In this case the meaning is that the Ark in the time of the New Covenant would not be used as it was previously (under the old covenant). Two areas of function that will of necessity be absent will be that of the Ark as a witness to the Law and as a conduit of the divine power in warfare. Under the New Covenant God's Law will be internalized through the indwelling Spirit so that, as verse 17 records "they will no longer walk after the stubbornness of their evil heart" (cf. Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). The tablets of the Law within the Ark will no longer be needed to bear witness against Israel of their violation of God's holiness, for they will be holy and live in obedience to God's Will (Ezekiel 36:27-28, 33; Zechariah 14:20-21. Moreover, in the Millennium Israel and the nations "will no longer learn war" (Isaiah 2:4). The Ark will no longer have to function as a symbol of God's protective power in war, since war will no longer exist. This interpretation is put forth in the textual notes of the present Israel Defense Forces standard issue Bible: "The Law of the Lord will be written in the heart, and there will be no need to keep it in the Ark. There will not be wars and there will be no need to take the Ark from place to place on the battlefield as it was in those former times."

From this evidence, while not conclusive, it may be suggested that the Ark of the Covenant may have a role to play in the end time, returning to complete the prophetic program in its focus on a rebuilt Temple and the restoration of the Glory of God to Israel and the nations in the Millennium.

Bibliography

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