

## TLCBiblical.com Video Lessons

### 218 - The Ark Of The Covenant & Mercy Seat

#### 1. Introduction

One of the most well known objects in Hebrew worship fades then disappears from the pages of the biblical text. Over the years its become the center and source of legends and mystical ideas. Templars, treasure hunters and archaeologists have attempted to track its whereabouts or find evidence of what happened to it. In this lesson we'll discuss **The Ark Of The Covenant & Mercy Seat** as we explore the realities of what it was and represented.

#### 2. The Ark of the Covenant

Popular movies have done much to raise public awareness of the existence of the Ark of the Covenant. Amidst the hype and mystery surrounding it are a number of ideas about what it was and what it was created for. These misconceptions aren't new. The Israelites failed to understand it as well. Although there are ideas about the Ark and its fate the reality that we find in the scriptures points to a simpler explanation. Although the Ark was built and housed in an area forbidden to all but the high priest from a physical perspective it was simply an elaborate box and like the other objects that we'll cover in these lessons, didn't contain any power of its own. In order to fully understand the Ark and its purpose we'll discuss:

- a. Construction of the Ark and the materials it was made from
- b. Usage of the Ark including placement and transporting it when the people moved
- c. Misconceptions and mishandling of the Ark by the children of Israel
- d. Figurative elements embodied in the Ark, and
- e. Modern misconceptions and conspiracy theories

Let's take a look at each of these.

#### 3. Construction of the Ark

When we talk about the Ark of the covenant we have to clarify its actual structure. The common idea of the Ark, from films and documentaries, is that it's a golden box with two cherubim sitting on the top of it with outstretched wings. The Ark itself consists of a box structure that contained a few items God directed Moses to place inside it. The top of the box however is a separate object known as the mercy seat. This is where the cherubim sit with their wings covering the space in the center. We're going to talk about both of these at the same time. They're two different objects but they're inseparable in their function and usage. We'll talk about the Ark first and then cover the Mercy Seat.

The instructions for the making the Ark appear for the first time in Exodus chapter twenty-five. ***“And they shall make an ark of acacia wood: two cubits and a half shall be the***

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*length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof. And thou shalt overlay it with pure gold, within and without shalt thou overlay it, and shalt make upon it a crown of gold round about. And thou shalt cast four rings of gold for it, and put them in the four feet thereof; and two rings shall be on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. And thou shalt make staves of acacia wood, and overlay them with gold. And thou shalt put the staves into the rings on the sides of the ark, wherewith to bear the ark. The staves shall be in the rings of the ark: they shall not be taken from it. And thou shalt put into the ark the testimony which I shall give thee.” (Ex 25.10-16 ASV).* In this passage we have a very rudimentary description of the Ark.

The measurements used are in cubits which is estimated to be about eighteen to twenty inches. The length of the Ark as stated here would then be about forty-five to fifty inches long or roughly 4 feet. The depth of the Ark would be about twenty-seven to thirty inches. The height of the box would be identical as the depth or roughly twenty-seven to thirty inches. The wood specified here is translated as acacia wood in modern translations. Acacia wood is a hardwood that has resistant properties and so was a good material to make durable items that were meant to last for a long period of time.

The wood of the Ark was then to be covered with gold described as an overlay which implies that thin sheets of gold may have been used to cover the ark. On the corners of the Ark there were to be rings for transporting it which were also to be made from gold. The gold for these rings were cast (Ex 37.3) and would therefore have been solid.

Along the rim of the Ark was a crown which was perhaps cast as the rings for the corners were (Ex 37.2). The crown may have served to lock in the mercy seat and may also have been somewhat decorative although the Ark was to be functional and not an object to be displayed. The rings on the corners were fitted for poles or staves that were used to carry the Ark. We'll see how these were to be used later when we discuss transporting the Ark.

One of the things I want to mention at this point addresses comments that usually come up in documentaries about the Ark. That's a question as to how the Hebrews had the amount of gold needed to build these items and secondly how did they know how to make these objects since they were a slave population that had been freed. I believe these statements are based on the general concept that the Hebrews were an illiterate undereducated group of people who only performed menial tasks such as making bricks for the Egyptians. The scriptures provide some detail that helps clear this misconception up.

*“And Jehovah spake unto Moses, saying, See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise skilful works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in cutting of stones for*

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*setting, and in carving of wood, to work in all manner of workmanship. And I, behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and in the heart of all that are wise-hearted I have put wisdom, that they may make all that I have commanded thee...*" (Ex 31.1-6). In other words, the men who were selected to make these objects were inspired by God who gave them the understanding and skill to create them. When we think of divine inspiration we may instantly think of the writers who were directed to record God's word. At this time, as the objects that were to be used for worship were created, the Holy Spirit would convey the information needed to perform these tasks. God has selected individuals to perform a variety of things throughout the biblical narrative and in each case we see a combination of the Lord's guidance or inspiration and the inherent qualities that the person has to complete the task.

Where did the gold and other things come from to build the items used in worship? Again there's a simple answer supplied by the scriptures. When God told Abraham that his offspring would be afflicted in a strange land for four generations he stated they would return with "**great substance**" (Gen 15.14). As the Hebrews prepared to depart they were told to "**borrow**" from the Egyptians those things that were needed. God placed it in the heart of the Egyptians to comply with this to the extent that the Hebrews "**spoiled**" the Egyptians (Ex 12.36). We expect to see this type of description when an invading army conquers a city or country but in this case the Hebrews were blessed by God as they left their oppression. This wasn't just payback for the terrible things that had happened to them, it was God's way of giving his people what they needed to take care of themselves and do the things they would be called on to perform. Later the people offered the materials to God of their own free will (Ex 25.1-9) and gave so much that they were told to stop as the materials collected were more than sufficient. (Ex 36.5-7)

At this point we have a gold box with cast gold rings at the corner, poles inserted in the rings for transport and a crown around the upper surface to lock the lid in place. That lid of course would be the Mercy Seat.

*"And thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof. And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat. And make one cherub on the one end, and the other cherub on the other end: even of the mercy seat shall ye make the cherubims on the two ends thereof. And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be. And thou shalt put the mercy seat above upon the ark..."* (Ex 25.17-21).

The description of the Mercy Seat is similar to those given for the Ark. The length would be two cubits and a half, or about forty-five to fifty inches long, and one and a half cubits, or about twenty-seven to thirty inches deep. No height measurement is given in the description. This is substituted by the directions for the cherubim that are to be mounted on it. The cherubim

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would be facing one another, wings extended so they shrouded the area between them which was specifically referred to as the mercy seat. The absence of dimensions for the cherubim or any idea of what they looked like is by design. God has never commanded the creation of any object to represent himself or any other heavenly being. We can speculate about what the cherubim looked like or how big they might have been but the reality is that we have no idea. Moses later reminded the children of Israel, “*And the Lord spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice.*” (Deut 4.12).

Now that we have a description of these items and their dimensions we can examine where they would be placed in the Tabernacle, their role in worship, how they were to be transported and restrictions imposed.

#### 4. Usage, worship and transporting the Ark

Bezalel the son of Uri of the tribe of Judah was given the task of building the Ark of the Covenant and Mercy Seat (Ex 37-1-16). When finished there were instructions that followed. These weren't just any list of steps to be taken. The Ark was one of the most sacred of the objects commanded by God and its contents, location and handling were very specific.

Inside the Ark the writer of Hebrews tells us was were the tables of the covenant, a pot of manna and Aaron's rod that budded (Heb 9.4). The pot of manna would be available at the time of the dedication and consecration of the Tabernacle as would a copy of the Law, but it was some time before the rod of Aaron that budded would be available. We'll take a closer look at this in a while. For now we can see the Ark was a container for God's words, his blessings and providence as seen in the manna, and a symbol of his authority represented by Aaron's rod.

God's commands and design, coupled with the inspiration for Bezalel to make the Ark create an image of holiness. The Tabernacle was divided into three sections. The outer area, or court, surrounded the structure itself. The door of the Tabernacle would be oriented toward the East. Inside, the first section of the Tabernacle was referred to as the Holy Place and was reserved for the Priests and Levites charged with maintaining the items and procedures conducted within. At the far end of the Holy Place was a barrier, the Vail, which separated the outer chamber from the innermost referred to as the Most Holy Place. This is where the Ark of the covenant was to be placed.

As we can see the Ark itself represented the Law, power and providence of God. The Mercy seat that was placed on top of the Ark complemented this as God explained its purpose. God stated, “*And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel.*” (Ex 25.22). We'll

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see a change in who has access to the Ark of the Covenant later on but at this point it appears that once the Tabernacle was setup and the Ark consecrated, that this may have been where Moses, and he alone would come before God to receive additional commands from the Lord. We need to remember that the Law was more than the ten commandments as I've stated before. Not only did God issue a large number of statutes at Sinai, as the people moved forward into the wilderness but additional laws would be given and some would be refined as time went on.

The day the Tabernacle was fully setup sacrifices were made and all of the items constructed were hallowed for service to God. ***“And it came to pass in the first month in the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was reared up. ... And he took and put the testimony into the ark, and set the staves on the ark, and put the mercy seat above upon the ark: And he brought the ark into the tabernacle, and set up the vail of the covering, and covered the ark of the testimony; as the Lord commanded Moses.”*** (Ex 40.17, 20-21). Earlier in the chapter God had given an order for placing the items in the Tabernacle which I'll cover in another lesson. Once in the Tabernacle the Ark was behind the Vail in the Most Holy Place and wasn't visible to anyone except the high priest.

God told Moses where to place the objects in the Tabernacle providing exact locations for them. Once done all of them, including the Ark, were to be anointed with the holy anointing oil to consecrate or hallow them (Ex 40.9). Moses, based on the passages I reviewed a moment ago, may have communed with God before the Ark in the Most Holy Place as needed. The high priest however wasn't to enter the Most Holy Place with the exception of one day a year (Heb 9.7) on the Day of Atonement. Instructions concerning the priest's conduct are also detailed by the Lord.

***“And the Lord said unto Moses, Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the vail before the mercy seat, which is upon the ark; that he die not: for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat. Thus shall Aaron come into the holy place: with a young bullock for a sin offering, and a ram for a burnt offering. He shall put on the holy linen coat, and he shall have the linen breeches upon his flesh, and shall be girded with a linen girdle, and with the linen mitre shall he be attired: these are holy garments; therefore shall he wash his flesh in water, and so put them on.”*** (Lev 16.2-4). This took place on the day of atonement and blood from the sacrifices was taken into the Most Holy Place.

The procedure for the offering and additional stipulations were made as well. God commanded, ***“And he shall take a censer full of burning coals of fire from off the altar before the Lord, and his hands full of sweet incense beaten small, and bring it within the vail: And he shall put the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the testimony, that he die not: And he shall take of the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it with his finger upon the mercy seat eastward; and before the***

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*mercy seat shall he sprinkle of the blood with his finger seven times.*” (Lev 16.12-14). There are some figurative links we can identify in this passage.

First of all, this was to be done on the tenth day of the seventh month (Lev 16.29-30). The blood of the sacrifice offered for the sins of the people was to be taken before the Mercy Seat on the Ark. Secondly the priest would take a censer, another holy object commanded by God, fill it with live coals from the altar of burnt offering, sprinkle the holy incense on it so that a smoke would be generated and cover the Mercy Seat. If these things weren't done the priest would die.

An interesting note about the priests garments that appears in Exodus has to be added to this as well. Speaking of these, God states, “*And beneath upon the hem of it thou shalt make pomegranates of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, round about the hem thereof; and bells of gold between them round about: A golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, upon the hem of the robe round about. And it shall be upon Aaron to minister: and his sound shall be heard when he goeth in unto the holy place before the Lord, and when he cometh out, that he die not.*” (Ex 28.33-35). If we add this to the procedural description we have an act of worship and atonement that was very detailed and had to be followed precisely or the priest would lose his life. When the blood was offered by the priest in the appropriate dress, with the censer of coals, incense and the blood of atonement, God would manifest his presence and set the sins of the people aside for one year.

Once it was hallowed and setup, the Ark of the Covenant was not to be seen again except by the high priest. When the time came to move the camp there were detailed procedures given by God for preparing it and then making the move. Many of the illustrations in Bibles and religious texts fail to recognize and represent this point. Let's review these procedures and the people who were to be involved.

The families of the Levites were separated and consecrated for service to God in and around the Tabernacle. Later they would be responsible for teaching the law to all of the people and would serve important functions in the nation. As instructions were given for the construction of the objects and their makers inspired, there were also Levites who were identified as being responsible for the care of various objects.

Three sons of Levi are named. These are Gershon, Kohath and Merari (Ex 6.16). Their descendants are also named and as duties for the care and maintenance of the Tabernacle are assigned, they're divided between the respective families. Care and handling of the Ark were assigned by God. “*And the chief of the house of the father of the families of the Kohathites shall be Elizaphan the son of Uzziel. And their charge shall be the ark, and the table, and the candlestick, and the altars, and the vessels of the sanctuary wherewith they minister, and the hanging, and all the service thereof.*” (Num 3.30-31). In addition to this they were initially supervised by Eleazar the son of Aaron (Num 3.32)



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So now we have specific individuals who were the only ones authorized by God himself to care for or come in proximity to the Ark of the Covenant and Mercy Seat. During the days of David, when he decided to bring the Ark to Jerusalem, it was being transported the wrong way by people who weren't authorized which cost Uzzah his life (**2 Sam 6.3-7**). The details given in the books of Law are vital to understanding why events like this took place. We'll talk about some of these later on. We need to understand the procedures and materials that were used to move the Ark.

From the descriptions we read about the construction of the Ark we need to remember some important points. God stated, *“And thou shalt make staves of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold. And thou shalt put the staves into the rings by the sides of the ark, that the ark may be borne with them. The staves shall be in the rings of the ark: they shall not be taken from it.”* (Ex 25.13-15). The means of handling the Ark followed a prescribed procedure.

God stated, *“And when the camp setteth forward, Aaron shall come, and his sons, and they shall take down the covering vail, and cover the ark of testimony with it: And shall put thereon the covering of badgers' skins, and shall spread over it a cloth wholly of blue, and shall put in the staves thereof.”* (Num 4.5-6). Other objects in the Tabernacle were also prepared in a similar manner before the camp moved. *“And when Aaron and his sons have made an end of covering the sanctuary, and all the vessels of the sanctuary, as the camp is to set forward; after that, the sons of Kohath shall come to bear it: but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die. These things are the burden of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of the congregation.”* (Num 4.15).

There are figurative aspects of these instructions that underscore the sacred nature of the Ark and Mercy Seat and their handling. The first cover placed over the Ark is the Vail which was a large curtain separating the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. This has both physical and powerful figurative significance which we'll discuss when we look at the Vail in a later lesson. After the vail is placed over the Ark a second and perhaps more durable cover of badgers skins are then placed. I'll add an additional note about this reference in a minute. The last covering placed over the Ark was one that was *“wholly”* blue. When we discuss the Tabernacle, priestly garments and the Vail we'll see that there are certain colors to be used that have significance.

In the King James Version there are many editions that translate the second covering as made of badgers skins. I have an older version of the King James that actually translates this as porpoise skins. The American Standard Bible translates this as seal skins. The New International renders this as durable leather and the Holman Christian Standard Bible renders to it as manatee skin. I think the best rendering of this that I've found is in **The Five Books Of Moses, The Schocken Bible Vol 1** by Everett Fox who translates this more literally and renders the covering as tanned leather skin (**The Five Books Of Moses, Everett Fox, Schocken Books, New York, page 672**). Why the diversity exists in these renderings to me isn't clear. It may be that the terms

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are an older form for which there wasn't a clear definition. Over the years I've had doubts that the Hebrews, and Egyptians from whom these materials were gathered, knew about manatees, skinned porpoises or trapped badgers. The common element to all of these renderings is that the second covering had water and heat resistant properties that protected the vail and Ark below insulating them from the elements.

Another interesting note figuratively is that there are three coverings. When I discussed the numbers of God I reviewed the use of the number three as representing the presence and work of God. We've identified three entities that are part of the godhead; the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In previous lessons I discussed the relationship of the members of the godhead and their role in creation and presence throughout the scriptures. This is also noteworthy as we see the fact that the Vail, representing a separation of the Holy and Most Holy Place is in direct contact with the Ark and Mercy Seat where God manifested his presence speaking to Moses and afterward to the high priest on the day of atonement. This is a subtle detail but things like this are often easily missed but have a great deal of meaning. The fact that God provided this level of detail makes them significant and emphasizes that we need to pay attention to things in God's word that we sometimes don't place any emphasis on.

So, the order of movement was clear. Once the Tabernacle and Ark were setup, no one except for Moses and later the high priest would see it on a regular basis. The high priest was only permitted in this area once a year and it appears that Moses would only be in the presence of God when called by the Lord. After that, even when it was being moved, the Ark was never to be seen again by anyone except the high priest. It was the priest, or initially Aaron and his sons, who would cover the Ark preparing it for transport. Once that was done, Levites, specifically descendants of Kohath, were the only ones permitted to carry the Ark, and the Ark was only to be lifted and carried using the staves made for that purpose. This explains why there were problems that arose later when these procedures and limits were ignored.

Before we discuss these I want to restate a comment I made earlier. Many artistic renderings of the Ark in transit are incorrect. Many times the Ark is seen being carried with staves but there are no coverings on it. Another mistake that is made in rendering the ark in documentaries and films is the overall depiction of the Ark as a simple wooden box that by all appearances could have been stuck together using pallet wood. Years ago I even saw a made for television production of the Exodus and events at Sinai depicting the Ark as a shabby dusty crate with feathers sticking out of it. These images are disgraceful at best and completely irreverent at the worst. We have no idea what the Ark looked like but if someone is going to represent it, it should be depicted with the art and majesty it was created with. The Ark and Mercy Seat were elegantly crafted items of worship made from the best materials under the guidance of the Holy Spirit at the direction of God. Unfortunately many of the renderings, particularly more recent ones, are created by individuals that have no belief, respect or love for God. We haven't been told to recreate such things but if we do, and this lesson and its illustrations are no exception,



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care should be taken to convey a sense of sacred devotion and respect for them. That lack of respect however even plagued God's people as we'll see next.

#### 5. Mistakes the Israelites made

The Israelites developed ideas about the Ark of the Covenant that were incorrect and bordered on magical or mystical thinking. We can understand how this could happen since the nature of humans and how we think hasn't changed in thousands of years. The children of Israel recognized the Ark as one of the most, if not the most of all sacred objects. Its separation and isolation would probably fuel the fire of speculation among them so they believed the object possessed power on its own.

Some of this perhaps stems from the crossing of the Jordan river under the leadership of Joshua. In preparation for crossing the Jordan into Canaan the people were given specific instructions concerning the Ark. ***“And they commanded the people, saying, When ye see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore.”*** (Josh 3.3-4). The Ark is a holy object. Its at the center of their worship to God and central to the day of atonement. Now the Ark will be carried before them and they have to leave 2000 cubits space between them and the Ark so they can all see it as a reference point. Based on an average of twenty inches to the cubit the distance would be approximately half a mile.

Continuing his instructions The Lord told Joshua, ***“And thou shalt command the priests that bear the ark of the covenant, saying, When ye are come to the brink of the water of Jordan, ye shall stand still in Jordan.....Now therefore take you twelve men out of the tribes of Israel, out of every tribe a man. And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of Jordan, that the waters of Jordan shall be cut off from the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand upon an heap.”*** (Josh 3.8, 12-13).

The crossing itself is interesting as we read the account of the event. ***“And as they that bare the ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped in the brim of the water, (for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest,) That the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap very far from the city Adam, that is beside Zaretan: and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, even the salt sea, failed, and were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho. And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan.”*** (Josh 3.15-17).

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The Levites carrying the Ark remained standing in the bed of the Jordan river until the people passed. ***“And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over Jordan, that the Lord spake unto Joshua, saying, Take you twelve men out of the people, out of every tribe a man, And command ye them, saying, Take you hence out of the midst of Jordan, out of the place where the priests' feet stood firm, twelve stones, and ye shall carry them over with you, and leave them in the lodging place, where ye shall lodge this night.”*** (Josh 4.1-3). The stones were taken from the area where the Levites were standing with the Ark. The following verses provide detail of how the stones were to be erected as a memorial so that in generations to come their descendants would know what the Lord had done.

We understand that the Lord was issuing commands and telling them what to do. We also know that it was God, not the Ark, that caused the water to stop and pile up as the downstream river bed dried. But most humans would look at this account and ascribe the power to the Ark, not the Lord. And we can tell that this happened later as the nation developed.

The priest Eli had been judge over Israel for some time and his sons, Hophni and Phineas were evil. Because of this God spoke to Samuel in a vision revealing what he was going to do. ***“And the Lord said to Samuel, Behold, I will do a thing in Israel, at which both the ears of every one that heareth it shall tingle. In that day I will perform against Eli all things which I have spoken concerning his house: when I begin, I will also make an end. For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not. And therefore I have sworn unto the house of Eli, that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be purged with sacrifice nor offering for ever.”*** (1 Sam 3.11-14).

At this point in the history of Israel there are significant changes made in the priesthood that God communicates to Eli through another prophet. ***“I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. Behold, the days come, that I will cut off thine arm, and the arm of thy father's house, that there shall not be an old man in thine house.”*** (1 Sam 2.30-31 ). Part of this included the end of Eli's house as the prophet reveals, ***“And this shall be a sign unto thee, that shall come upon thy two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas; in one day they shall die both of them.”*** (1 Sam 2.34).

The Philistines then gathered their army to attack Israel and in the battle four thousand men are killed. Now we get a glimpse of the flawed thinking that existed in the land. God promised the people that if they were faithful to him they would be victorious over their enemies. At various times, such as the battle of Ai during the time of Joshua, losses and failure to win a battle was an indicator of sin causing God to withdraw his blessings from them and the elders recognized that God hadn't blessed them. Their response and solution says a lot about their spiritual state. ***“Wherefore hath the Lord smitten us to day before the Philistines? Let us fetch***

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*the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.” (1 Sam 4.3).*

So, if God won't help us, we'll get the Ark! The failure to recognize the real problem is the beginning of their downfall. The solution they come up with is a priceless example of human ignorance. Since God has apparently withdrawn his blessings they'll bypass the Lord and bring the Ark and its going to change the tide - because it has power. Right? Not exactly.

The Ark was currently at Shiloh along with Hophni and Phineas, the evil sons of Eli who God has stated would die in one day because of their evil ways. As they bring the Ark into the Israelite camp the army is so happy that they shout and the noise is heard in the Philistine encampment. Now we get a glimpse of how the pagan Philistines thought as they discussed what this meant for them. ***“And the Philistines were afraid, for they said, God is come into the camp. And they said, Woe unto us! for there hath not been such a thing heretofore. Woe unto us! who shall deliver us out of the hand of these mighty Gods? these are the Gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness. Be strong, and quit yourselves like men, O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants unto the Hebrews, as they have been to you: quit yourselves like men, and fight.” (1 Sam 4.7-9).*** There are several things we can get out of this that will help us understand the issues involved.

The Philistines knew the story of how the Hebrews were released from bondage in Egypt. Not because they read the Bible but because the news of the devastating defeat of the most powerful nation in the world by a foreign god was still circulating. This also indicates how greatly the plagues affected Egypt and the fear this filled the nations with. The events that took place in Egypt and the exodus occurred over four hundred years before this which shows how fearful these things were. The Philistine don't have any knowledge of God. Their deities are represented by the idols they make. Success and failure is then ascribed to the gods represented by their physical idols. They determine that the only course of action that will win is to be stronger and fight. And the result is catastrophic.

In short the army of Israel is defeated, sent into full retreat. Thirty-thousand men die and the Ark is taken by the Philistines. Hophni and Phineas, the corrupt sons of Eli are killed and when Eli is told of their deaths he falls from where he's sitting, breaks his neck and dies (**1 Sam 4.10-18**). What's interesting is his reaction wasn't because his sons were dead. He fell because of the terror he felt knowing that the Ark was taken.

The Philistines think they've won a great victory. The Ark of the god of the Hebrews is taken so they display it proudly in the temple of their god, Dagon, placing it next to their idol. ***“And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of the Lord. And they took Dagon, and set him in his place again. And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon was fallen upon his face to***

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*the ground before the ark of the Lord; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only the stump of Dagon was left to him. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.” (1 Sam 5.3-5).* Following this God afflicted the Philistines until they finally sent the Ark away on a cart after seven months. The Philistines, like the Israelites thought it was the Ark that was doing these things to them and feared it was going to kill them all.

There are several points that need to be stressed here. First let's take a look at some of the attitudes that existed with both the Israelites and Philistines.

- a. God had withdrawn his blessings from Israel due to sin which is why they were losing
- b. When they realized God had done this they failed to seek the Lord
- c. Their decision to bring the Ark into battle as a talisman was unauthorized by God
- d. The elders assumed that the Ark itself had power to aid them and they would win
- e. Capturing the Ark led the pagans to believe their god was superior
- f. The Philistines, like the Israelites, believed it was the Ark that afflicted them
- g. When their image of Dagon was broken the Philistines feared the Ark, not God
- h. Both the Israelites and the Philistines conclusions about the Ark were incorrect

Now let's take a look at the reality of the situation in the context of how they were to be serving and respecting God and following his laws.

- a. Eli, Hophni, Phineas and the elders erred in practice and judgment
- b. The elders attempted to bypass God and use an object they thought was powerful
- c. They failed to realize that the power was God, not the Ark
- d. The Israelites took it on themselves to disturb the Ark and break God's law
- e. Their actions resulted in God's judgment against Eli's house and Israel
- f. The Philistines learned that their god was nothing compared to the god of Israel

We could expand these lists but some of the most important points are identified. As I stated earlier, none of the objects created for use in worship to the Lord had power in themselves. God was the power that worked when certain conditions were met and respected. Ideas such as this parallel attitudes today that conclude that we can ignore God, do what we want, employ the methods we think are best and the Lord will approve. That didn't work for Israel and it won't work for us today.

The second incident we'll cover occurs during the reign of David, the second king of Israel. This incident has to do with David's good intentions and while he should have known better he exercises poor judgment as we'll see.

David's plan was to bring the Ark to Jerusalem and took thirty-thousand men to

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accompany it on the journey. *“And David arose, and went with all the people that were with him from Baale of Judah, to bring up from thence the ark of God, whose name is called by the name of the Lord of hosts that dwelleth between the cherubims. And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab that was in Gibeah: and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drave the new cart. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab which was at Gibeah, accompanying the ark of God: and Ahio went before the ark.”* (2 Sam 6.2-4).

*“And when they came to Nachon's threshingfloor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God.”* (2 Sam 6.6-7). This had an effect on David which is also recorded. *“And David was displeased, because the Lord had made a breach upon Uzzah: and he called the name of the place Perezuzzah to this day. And David was afraid of the Lord that day, and said, How shall the ark of the Lord come to me? So David would not remove the ark of the Lord unto him into the city of David: but David carried it aside into the house of Obededom the Gittite.”* (2 Sam 6.8-10).

David later learned that God had blessed the house of Obededom and after three months returned and brought the Ark to Jerusalem where it was placed in the Tabernacle. This story is somewhat different from the incident with the Philistines and we can easily see the errors.

- a. First, why was the Ark not in the Tabernacle?
- b. Levites of the sons of Kohath weren't called to transport the Ark
- c. Was the Ark properly covered - the vail was probably still in the Tabernacle
- d. Where were the staves that were to be used to carry the Ark
- e. How was David unaware of these things

As Moses prepared for his death he addressed the children of Israel which we have recorded as the book of Deuteronomy and he gives instructions for what kings should do as they assumed their throne. Moses states, *“And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them: That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel.”* (Deut 17.18-20).

Handling the Ark was part of the Law. We know from the Psalms that David spent time in the word of the Lord but at this time he either hadn't accomplished that yet or didn't remember how the Ark was to be moved. The reason doesn't matter. The problem is that David made a

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decision in ignorance and although well intended, resulted in a tragedy. The concept that David had of God and the Ark is also stated in an interesting way. David refers to the Lord as “*the Lord of hosts that dwelleth between the cherubims*” (2 Sam 6.2). At this point David had the right idea and was doing something that needed to be done but apparently didn’t take the time to do it according to the Lord’s instructions.

There are some things that we can learn from this event that will help us understand God and the need to adhere to his commands.

- a. David had good intentions but failed to find out how he should accomplish the task
- b. David’s failure violated God’s directives on handling the Ark
- c. Uzzah also had good intentions but violated God’s commands and lost his life
- d. This event is a continuation of spiritual failures that had begun many years earlier

Once more the power was God’s, not the Ark. David referred to God as the Lord of hosts who dwelt between the cherubim which wasn’t entirely accurate. David perceived the Ark as the focal point that represented God which elevated the Ark above its actual status. This was a lesson that David would learn as he grew and matured in his role as king. As we can see, God doesn’t permit changes to his conditions and laws. When humans take it on themselves to impose such changes the result will be catastrophic spiritually. It also demonstrates how a lack of understanding in David’s time that started over twenty years earlier hadn’t been corrected. The longer error continues the harder it is to fix. Throughout his life David learned to understand, respect and follow the Law and love the Lord following God’s ways.

#### 6. Figures and types in the Ark

Concealed within the Most Holy Place and accessible only once a year by the high priest, the Ark was within itself a mystery. It represented a single point of access to God. At that point, and at the time the blood of the sacrifices were presented in the presence of God on the day of atonement. On that day God set the sins of the people aside for the next year. The high priest authorized by God to perform these duties. He was to be properly clothed and accompanied by the incense that smoked over the coals from the altar of burnt offering. On the altar the sacrifice for sin was made, the blood collected and brought before the Mercy Seat where God manifested his presence. The Ark was the container of the Law given to Moses, a pot of manna representing God’s provision for the people and later the rod of Aaron that budded confirming the selection of the priest as a delegate of God’s authority. Examining these things we can see figures pointing to the fulfillment of God’s plan to save mankind.

The way of salvation was hidden, obscured in prophecy, figures and types. Paul stated that this was done for a reason as he wrote to the Corinthians. “*But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory:*”



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*Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” (1 Cor 2.7-8). God issued the first prophecy about the coming of one who would defeat the power of Satan (Gen 3.15) and sent the Messiah at the time he selected (Gal 4.4).*

Christ, the Messiah would be the single point of access to the mercy of God. Christ stated, ***“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (John 14.6)***. All things concerning salvation were centered on Christ. He was the only acceptable sacrifice that could permanently atone for the sin of man for all time. It was his blood that when brought before the presence of God made that possible. The Mercy Seat represented the access of the only blood and sacrifice that could make that happen.

Christ was ordained by God as the high priest who would never die. The writer of Hebrews discusses this in the comparison of the superiority of the Gospel over the Law Moses. ***“For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore.” (Heb 7.26-28)***. Christ wasn't only the high priest of the new law, he was also the sacrifice whose blood made salvation possible.

I've mentioned in the past that God acts in the present as though things in the future are already past. When the Ark of the covenant was put in place it was done with the image of Christ as the high priest and sacrifice whose blood would save the entire world from sin completing God's plan of redemption.

Christ was also the container of the word of God. John describes this in detail in his Gospel account. ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.” (John 1.1-4)***. The word that Christ brought into the world was that of his father (John 17.7-8). In that way the Ark, like Christ, contained the word which had come from the mouth of God. We also allude to the word of God as that which sustains the soul just as the manna did for the Hebrews in the wilderness. Peter encourages Christians to desire the ***“sincere milk of the word” that they would be able to grow...*** (1 Pet 2.2). Christ's response to Satan when tempted to turn stones to bread mirrors this. ***“It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” (Matt 4.4)***.

Finally the staff of Aaron that budded and was placed in the Ark stands as a figure of the authority of God as well. Aaron and Moses were challenged in their leadership of the people as a

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rebellion approached. God settled the matter in a way that produced a tangible outcome that couldn't be denied.

Following the rebellion of Dathan, Abiram and Korah, the people were upset over the Lord's judgment against these people. *“And Moses said, Hereby ye shall know that the Lord hath sent me to do all these works; for I have not done them of mine own mind. If these men die the common death of all men, or if they be visited after the visitation of all men; then the Lord hath not sent me. But if the Lord make a new thing, and the earth open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertain unto them, and they go down quick into the pit; then ye shall understand that these men have provoked the Lord. And it came to pass, as he had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground clave asunder that was under them: And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation. And all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them: for they said, Lest the earth swallow us up also. And there came out a fire from the Lord, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense.”* (Num 16.28-35).

The challenge however didn't stop there. *“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and take of every one of them a rod according to the house of their fathers, of all their princes according to the house of their fathers twelve rods: write thou every man's name upon his rod. And thou shalt write Aaron's name upon the rod of Levi: for one rod shall be for the head of the house of their fathers. And thou shalt lay them up in the tabernacle of the congregation before the testimony, where I will meet with you. And it shall come to pass, that the man's rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom: and I will make to cease from me the murmurings of the children of Israel, whereby they murmur against you.”* (Num 17.1-5).

The leaders of the twelve tribes brought Moses and Aaron their rods which were placed in the Tabernacle. *“And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds. And Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord unto all the children of Israel: and they looked, and took every man his rod.”* (Num 17.8-9). God demonstrated that the leadership he chose was invested in Moses and Aaron. This tangible sign, the rod of Aaron that budded and blossomed was then placed in the Tabernacle and later the Ark as a sign of God's authority in choosing a priest.

Today there are just as many challenges to the authority of God through Christ as there were then. The Hebrews had seen the power of God in the plagues, parting of the Red Sea, manna and the Lord's appearance at Sinai. In spite of that they still allowed themselves to focus on what they wanted and rejected the leadership God ordained. The presence of the rod, like the

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coming of the Messiah represented the fact that there is no other priest, sacrifice or path to salvation except through Christ. The Ark of the Covenant and Mercy Seat stand as powerful silent figures pointing to the power, authority and majesty of God and his eventual redemption of man through Christ.

### **7. Modern mysteries and conspiracies**

Through its history, after the days of Moses and Joshua, the Ark of the Covenant and Mercy Seat were mishandled, misused and eventually disappear from the text. At the time Solomon was setting up the Temple, the Ark was brought in but when examined the rod of Aaron and pot of manna had been removed. ***“There was nothing in the ark save the two tables which Moses put therein at Horeb, when the Lord made a covenant with the children of Israel, when they came out of Egypt.” (2 Chron 5.10).*** Josiah, who restored the worship of the Lord following the idolatrous influence of Manasseh and Amon, once more restored the Ark to its place in the Temple as it was repaired and the Levites rededicated to perform their duties (**2 Chron 35.3**). After the reign of Josiah the nation lapsed into evil until there was no remedy (**2 Chron 36.16**) and were eventually plundered and destroyed by the Babylonians.

In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, that record the return of the remnant and rebuilding of the Temple and walls of Jerusalem, there’s no mention of the Ark or its contents. This absence has led to a number of popular theories as to the fate of the Ark. This includes the idea that:

- a. The Ark was plundered for its gold by the Babylonians or kings of Judah
- b. The Ark was secretly taken away for safekeeping
- c. The Ark resides in a temple in Ethiopia where its guarded by priests sworn to the task
- d. The Templars recovered the Ark and have it in a secure undisclosed location

Ideas concerning the nature of the Ark have also been proposed as well including the ideas that

- a. The Templars or others learned to harness the power of the Ark and use it
- b. The Ark was designed by extraterrestrials and contains an otherworldly power source
- c. Mystical energies connected to the Ark may serve to teleport or bend time and space

None of these, with the exception of the possibility that the gold had been plundered by the Babylonians or Assyrians, or harvested by the last kings of Judah as tribute or to hire the Egyptians as mercenaries has any merit. We have to know that during the days of Jeremiah when God pronounced that the people had broken the covenant, the Lord proclaimed and described that a new covenant was coming. The writer of Hebrews quoting Jeremiah thirty-one states, ***“In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away.” (Heb 8.13).*** Worship was restored when the remnant returned but the

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nation and their devotion to the Law was only a shadow of what had been. The glory of Israel was diminished and wasn't going to return. The return of the glory of the kingdom and God's people would be seen in the church, not a physical nation.

We can draw some conclusions about the Ark from the scriptural narrative.

- a. the Ark was a majestic object built by skilled craftsmen who were guided by God
- b. The Ark figuratively represented God's nature and future redemption of all mankind
- c. The Ark possessed no power in itself, the power was God
- d. There are no mystical energies in the Ark that can be channeled and used
- e. The Ark wasn't a weapon or power source
- f. Those who violated the restrictions concerning the Ark were struck by God, not the Ark
- g. Focusing on the Ark rather than the one who designed and commanded it is a failure in understanding God and transforms the Ark into an idol.

There are many other ideas that have been proposed over the years but the fact is the Ark of the Covenant and Mercy Seat were figures of God's presence, power and mercy. Those who focus on the Ark without understanding its relationship with God aren't looking at things from a spiritual perspective. The Ark was a magnificent object but it had its place and time which are both passed.

## **9. Next**

An enduring symbol of Judaism is the menorah, a multi armed lamp representing the faith of Jews around the world for centuries. The design of the lamp is a preservation of one of the most well known objects in the Tabernacle and later the Temple of Solomon. In the next lesson we'll discuss **The Lampstand** and its figurative representation lighting the way to the fulfillment of God's plan to save mankind.