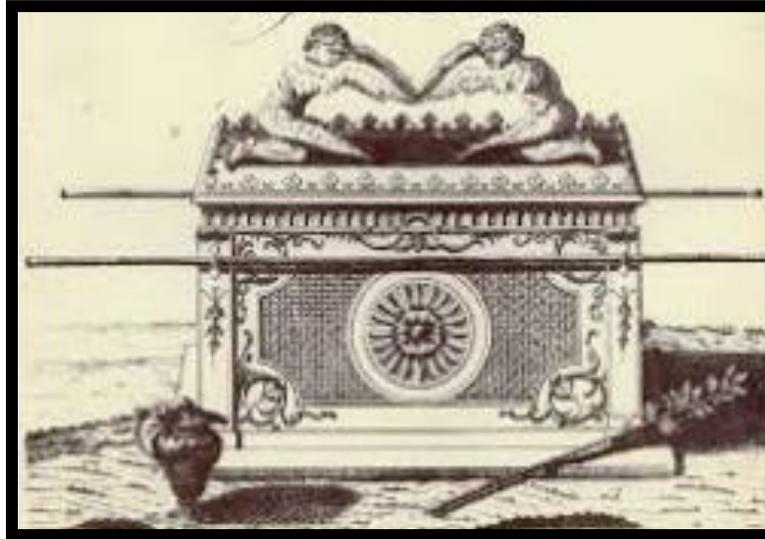


Mary and the Bible – Part 2 of 4

Introduction

In last week's introductory article, we discussed the biblical roots of the church's teaching on giving honor to Mary and reviewed the Gospel account of the Annunciation. This week we will be focusing on Mary's title "Ark of the New Covenant" and its biblical roots.

On the surface the Bible seems to say very little about Mary. When we look deep into Sacred Scripture, we do find Mary in a profound way. We understand the high praise and importance the Church gives her. To understand what the Church means when She refers to Mary as the Ark of the New Covenant we need to understand the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant.



Typology in Sacred Scripture

Typology is crucial in understanding relationships that exist between the Old and New Testaments. A type is a person or event in the Old Testament that prefigures or foreshadows a reality in the New Testament. The early Christian theologian St. Augustine recognized this relationship when he wrote "the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New." Many Catholic doctrines are best understood in the framework of typological relationships.

Doctrines related to Mary and her place in salvation history are highlighted through the careful study of typology. The great Eastern Father, Irenaeus, in the second century explains, "The knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary." Irenaeus further says, "For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the Virgin Mary set free through faith."

Covenant

The word "covenant" comes from the Latin word "convenire" which means to come together. A covenant is an agreement, a contract and a coming together. When we read the word covenant in Holy Scripture we read about the coming together of God and His people and what binds them together. God's covenant is more than a contract or an agreement. It is a sacred family bond. Covenant in Holy Scripture is much more than an agreement. It refers to the relationship between God and His people.

God entered into covenants with His people because we through sin, separate ourselves from His eternal love. To show us the way to union with Him, God enters into covenant with humanity. In the Old Testament we read the stories of six times that God entered into covenant with man.

1. The covenant with Adam and Eve in Genesis.
2. The covenant with Noah.
3. The covenant with Abram (who would later be called Abraham).

4. The covenant with Moses (which relates to the Ark of the Covenant).
5. The covenant with David.
6. The covenant with Jeremiah, fulfilled by Jesus.

Covenant with Moses

We read in Exodus of God's plan for leading His people out of slavery in Egypt. We read the story of Moses, chosen to lead the Israelites out of slavery. We read how the Israelites wandered for forty years in the desert before reaching the promised land.

God entered into covenant with his people when He spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him a set of ten guidelines for righteous living, the Ten Commandments. These guidelines formed part of the solemn covenant between Israel and God. These guidelines were so important that God instructed Moses to build an Ark in which to keep the commandments. In Exodus God gives detailed instructions on how the Ark is to be constructed. The Ark is covered with gold: "Have them make a chest of acacia wood . . . overlay it with pure gold, both inside and out . . . cast four gold rings for it . . . then make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold" (Exodus. 25:10-13).

Likewise, the New Testament refers to the Ark of the Covenant as gold-covered: "Behind the second curtain was a room called the most holy place which had the golden altar of incense and the gold covered Ark of the Covenant." (Heb 9:3-4). This foreshadows the purity, holiness, and consecration to God of Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant.

The Ark of the Covenant held three items: "the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant" (Heb. 9:4).

The Ark of the Covenant is covered in pure gold, both inside and out. Four rings of gold are attached to its four corners, two on each side and through these rings staves of wood overlaid with gold are inserted to carry the Ark. These staves are not to be removed. A golden lid ornamented with two golden cherubim are placed above the Ark. This will form the space where God will appear and address His people. The Ark is to be placed under a veil at all times to conceal it. The Ark was so sacred that it was not to be touched or viewed by the Jews and could only be approached by the High Priest.

The Ark was carried by the Israelites during their forty years of wandering in the desert. Whenever the Israelites camped, the Ark was placed in a separate room in a sacred tent, called the Tabernacle.

Male members of the tribe of Levi carried the Ark by its staves approximately 800 meters or 2,600 feet in front of the people on their way to the promised land. Three items were in the Ark of the Covenant: stone tablets containing the commandments given to Moses, the rod belonging to Aaron, which had budded, and manna.

The Ten Commandments are very familiar to us all. They are the basic rules that must govern the lives of God's people.

Manna

Manna is the food from heaven that fed the Israelites on their 40-year journey. In Exodus manna is described as being "a fine flake-like thing." It had to be collected from the ground in the morning, before it was melted by the heat of the sun. It looked like a coriander seed in size but was white in color. The Israelites ground it and pounded it into cakes which were then baked. Exodus recounts that raw manna tasted like wafers that had been made with honey. The Israelites were instructed to eat only the manna they had gathered each day for the manna would spoil overnight. The exception was the manna collected on the day before the Sabbath, when twice the amount was gathered. This manna did not spoil overnight.

"This is what the Lord commanded: Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning." (Exodus 16:23-24) The Israelites saved it until morning as Moses commanded and it did not spoil. The Israelites considered manna their bread from heaven.

The Rod of Aaron

The Rod of Aaron is described in the Old Testament book of Numbers. Numbers recounts what happened when the Israelites neared the promised land.

Moses sent out scouts to inspect the land and its people and report back to him. These men reported that the land of Canaan was rich and fertile but that its people were very strong. This caused fear and division among the Jews. They disagreed on what to do. Some wanted to return to Egypt and others wanted to proceed forward. They also disagreed

about who should lead them. Moses then ordered that each tribe provide a staff with the name of its proposed leader inscribed on it. Moses instructed the tribe of Levi to provide the staff of Aaron. That night the staffs were placed in the tent with the Ark.

In the morning when Moses went to the tent the staff of Aaron had budded. It had leaves and flowers and it bore fresh almonds. This was a sign from God that Aaron was the chosen high priest and was to lead the Jews into Canaan. Because their faith had been weak and they had not trusted God, the Israelites entry into the promised land was once again delayed.

The Ark Leads the Israelites

When the Israelites entered into the promised land the Ark led them on. When the Israelites went to battle they were led by the Levites carrying the Ark.

When the Israelites arrived at the banks of the River Jordan, the Ark was carried in the lead, in front of the people and was the signal for them to move forward. During the crossing, the river grew dry as soon as the feet of the priests carrying the Ark touched its waters. It remained so until the priests with the Ark left the river after the people had passed over.

During the Battle of Jericho, the Ark was carried around the city once a day for six days, preceded by seven men and seven priests sounding seven trumpets. On the seventh day, the seven priests sounding the seven trumpets before the Ark circled the city seven times. They gave a great shout and Jericho's walls fell down flat and the people took the city.

The Ark of the Old Testament was how God dealt with the Israelites. When King David brought the Ark into Jerusalem, "David danced before the Lord with all his might." (2 Samuel 6:14) "And then they brought in the Ark of the Lord ... and David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings." (2 Samuel: 6"17)

Worship was given to God present through the Ark. The Israelites were not worshipping the Ark. They were worshipping God. Honoring the Ark of the Covenant did not take away from the worship due to God.



Mary, Ark of the New Covenant

Saint Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria, is credited with writing about the connections between the Ark of the Covenant and the Virgin Mary. "O noble Virgin, truly you are greater than any other greatness. For who is your equal in greatness, O dwelling place of God the Word? To whom among all creatures shall I compare you, O Virgin? You are greater than them all, O Ark of the Covenant, clothed with purity instead of gold! You are the Ark in which is found the golden vessel containing the true manna, that is, the flesh in which Divinity resides." (Homily of the Papyrus of Turin)