

The Coming of the New Ark to Jerusalem: A Christmas Story

December 22, 2008

The Ark of the Covenant of Israel is customarily thought of as having come to Jerusalem only once. Second Samuel 6 describes King David and 30,000 soldiers bringing the Ark to Jerusalem from the home of Abinadab in Kirjath Jearim, where the Philistines left it when they brought it back to Israel. Kerejath Jearim was about 50 kilometers west of Jerusalem, close to the border of Philistia. The trip back to Jerusalem for the Ark was accomplished in two stages and a three-month delay they hadn't planned on, but it is essential to the theme of this story.

Uzziah, one of Abinadab's two sons who were employed in leading the cart on which the Ark was carried, reached out and touched the Ark in an attempt to steady it when the oxen stumbled, and was killed for this offense to God. David became fearful of the Ark and decided to deposit it at the home of Obed-Edom the Gittite, five kilometers from Jerusalem. There it stayed for three months.



After reports of how Obed-Edom's home was blessed by the presence of the Ark, David set out again and brought the Ark into the city, dancing naked before it, with the soldiers and all the people playing musical instruments and rejoicing. The Ark was kept in a tent outside David's palace until after Solomon built the temple.

The Ark of the Covenant was Israel's greatest treasure. It symbolized the presence of God with the Jewish nation, but it was truly more than symbolic; it was divine. When the Ark was with Israel, God's presence was with the children of Jacob. When the Ark was with the people, miraculous things happened, such as victory in battles in which the Ark led the army. It meant God and Israel were together. It was the place where God met his chosen ones.

When the temple was built, the Ark was placed inside the windowless Holy of Holies, into which the high priest only was allowed. It was a chest built of acacia wood, a material that was considered worthy of housing God, everlasting and with no defect. Inside it were placed the two stones onto which the Ten Commandments were engraved; the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Jewish Bible; Aaron's rod, the one that budded miraculously; and a jar of manna, food from heaven.

On top of the Ark was the mercy seat, upon which the priest sprinkled the blood of the atoning sacrificial lamb. The Ark disappeared in the fifth or sixth century when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple and has never been found. God might not want it to be found and may have caused its permanent disappearance, because under his new covenant, the Holy Spirit indwells every believer, and there is no need for any other representation for God. Could the Ark, if it were found, get closer to his children than the Spirit?

But when newly-pregnant Mary, the 14-year-old who was still virgin, traveled from Nazareth to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who lived

on the edge of Jerusalem, the incident was really the new coming of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. She brought God with her in her womb, and by bringing God to Jerusalem, she was redoing the function of the original Ark. She was surrounded by the Holy Spirit of God, so that Elizabeth, her elderly cousin, who was six months pregnant with her baby, was filled with the Spirit and spoke things that could have only been the result of being revealed to her by him. We find the account of Mary's visit in Luke 1. This visit was in reality the Ark entering Jerusalem for the second time, Mary being the new Ark. We shall see the similarities between the first and second or new coming of the Ark to Jerusalem in the rest of the story.

The First Coming of the Ark (2 Samuel 6)

David and 30,000 men selected from all the tribes of Israel traveled about 50 kilometers west of Jerusalem to the house of Abinadab, who lived in Kirjath Jearim. The Ark had been in his custody for 20 years, because the Philistines had brought it back to Israel. They had captured it and kept it for seven months, and it had been a curse on them. The first night they set it at the feet of Dagon, their god; upon entering the temple the next morning, they found Dagon fallen to the floor near the Ark of the Covenant of Israel. It happened the next night, only Dagon had broken its hands off. Then they took it out of Ashdod on to Ekron. Plagues of tumors and rats killed over 50,000 Philistines in Ekron, and they decided it was too damaging for them to keep. They determined to return it to Israel as soon as possible, together with an offering of five golden tumors and many golden rats. The closest Israeli city to the border was Kirjath Jearim, so that's where they took it, placing the Ark in the keeping of Abinadab.

A new cart was built and oxen were prepared to pull the cart. Two sons of Abinadab were assigned, Ahio, to lead the oxen, and Uzziah, to walk alongside the cart. The morning they started back to Jerusalem, David was ecstatic with joy, together with all his men. David danced before the cart, and all 30,000 Israelites sang and played every kind of musical instrument.

After the oxen took six steps, the procession halted while a bull was killed as an offering to God. It is not known whether they stopped for a similar sacrifice every six steps. The return trip would normally require several days without the frequent stops, and they were planning to celebrate and rejoice all the time.

However, an unfortunate accident happened. One of the oxen stumbled near the threshing floor of Nacon, which was near Jerusalem, and Uzziah reached out his hand to steady the Ark and died, for touching the Ark was a grave offense against God. David became angry toward God and fearful to take the Ark into the city. He asked, "How can the Ark of the Lord ever come to me?" Therefore, he decided to leave the Ark at the house of Obed-Edom until he was confident God would favor its being brought into the city. Obed-Edom was a Levite. He took care of the precious Ark for a period of three months. Note that this was the same length of time that Mary stayed in Elizabeth's home, until the birth of Elizabeth's child, John the Baptist.

After three months, reports came to David that Obed-Edom's house had been incredibly blessed while the Ark was there. So he gathered his army and went to Obed-Edom's house, and this time, they finished the task. Instead of a cart, they used poles with four men purified for carrying the Ark. It took a long time, for they were at least five kilometers away from the palace. Also, this time, David danced nude in front of the Ark. The Bible doesn't say whether other Jews danced without clothes.

There are at least 5 points in the coming of the Ark to Jerusalem that are similar to Mary's visit to Elizabeth:

- *The Ark, to begin with, was about 50 kilometers from Jerusalem. That was approximately the same distance Mary traveled from Nazareth to Elizabeth's house.*

- *David and all the Israelites celebrated by dancing, leaping, singing, playing all types of musical instruments, at least at the beginning and ending of the trip. John, the baby at six months' age in the womb of Elizabeth, jumped inside the womb when the news of Mary's coming reached Elizabeth. This is evidence that unborn babies are live human beings, because unborn John, at six months, obviously recognized the coming of baby Jesus, less than a month old.*
- *The Ark detoured and was delayed for three months at a distance of about five kilometers from David's palace, which was adjacent to the future site of the temple. Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in a small village approximately five kilometers from the temple, where Zechariah officiated as a priest.*
- *David was humbly doubtful that he was worthy of the honor, because he asked, "How can the Ark of the Lord ever come to me?" Elizabeth was humbly doubtful about why she was so blessed as to be visited by God inside Mary's womb. She said, "But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"*
- *The Ark stayed at the home of Obed-Edom for three months, and his house was blessed by the Holy Spirit. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, until John was born, and the house of Elizabeth was blessed by the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:65 says, "The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things."*

The Coming of the New Ark (Luke 1:26-45,56)

The gospel of Luke begins with a brief statement of his purpose, followed by an account of Gabriel's visit to Zechariah, promising that God had heard

their prayers for a child and that Elizabeth was to become pregnant with a son. This son would be named John, because he was to be a great prophet. Zechariah was slow to believe, and his tongue was silenced by the angel until the day John was dedicated after his birth. Elizabeth had a young cousin, Mary, who lived in Nazareth, about 50 kilometers north of Jerusalem. Communication between Nazareth and the small town on the edge of Jerusalem being slow and infrequent, it is not likely that news of Elizabeth's condition had reached Nazareth before the angel Gabriel appeared to 14-year-old Mary six months later with good news.

Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Mary had the visit from Gabriel. Every Jewish girl for centuries, maybe even today, dreamed of being mother of the Messiah. Many of them were named Miriam, which means Mary in Greek. However, I am sure Gabriel's visit was a surprise to Mary. The angel told her that God had favored her by choosing her to carry and give birth to the baby that later would be called the Son of God. Of course, she was troubled at first, because she was betrothed to be married to Joseph, a descendant of David, and the Jewish elders would have to certify her virginity before any Jewish man would marry her. He told her that she would not become pregnant in the ordinary way, but that the Holy Spirit would surround her, and God would create the baby in her womb; the baby would be God's Son. The angel Gabriel also told her that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant in her sixth month.

Immediately, Mary set out on the journey to her cousin Elizabeth's house on the edge of Jerusalem. How she traveled, and who might have accompanied her, are not known; but it was a hard and arduous trip for a girl of 14. She probably crossed over Jordan and went down the east bank in order to stay out of Samaria. We don't know.

If you think of Mary, already pregnant with Jesus, to be Israel's New Ark, it would not be too much of a stretch. After all, Mary was the chest, or outside covering, for God himself, and they were heading to the Holy City,

the central location of God's chosen people, just as the original Ark had hundreds of years earlier. One companion that traveled with them, for sure, was the Holy Spirit. I would hate to have been the robber that ambushed this caravan. The Spirit had been with the original Ark as well. The distance Mary had to cover was about the same as that of David and the first Ark, from Kirjath Jearim to Obed-Edom's house.

When she was announced to Elizabeth, the baby in her womb jumped for joy, which was John the Baptist celebrating the coming of Jesus before he had even entered the room where John was. How could he have known? Only through revelation of the Holy Spirit. How could Elizabeth have known that Mary was also pregnant, and that her baby was the Son of God, if she had not been filled with the Spirit? Her first greeting to Mary was, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear." Remember the house of Obed-Edom? It was blessed by the Spirit while the Ark was there; so was the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Mary stayed the three months that remained until Elizabeth gave birth, and the happiness of their house spread to all the neighbors and people of Judea.

Remember that Zechariah doubted the angel's promise, and was silenced for the whole nine months because of his doubt. But Mary and Elizabeth did not doubt, and that was the key to their blessings. In Luke 1:45, Elizabeth said, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished."

Looking at these two passages of Scripture simultaneously, we see a characteristic of the Bible that proves once again it is the inspired word of God. In reading the New Testament, it is good to remember that the writers have come from a culture in which the Old Testament forms a background for everything that they do; and, more, God ties incidents together in layers. Who but God would see clearly that Mary's visit to Elizabeth was actually similar to the Ark of the Covenant's trip to Jerusalem, in the spiritual sense that, in both incidents, God himself was journeying to

Jerusalem to meet with the people of Israel? Certainly the authors did not compare notes; it must be that God superintended their thoughts.

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