

# Build Me an Ark

*Exodus 25:9-22*

<sup>9</sup> Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

<sup>10</sup> "They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height.

<sup>11</sup> You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it.

<sup>12</sup> You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it.

<sup>13</sup> You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold.

<sup>14</sup> And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them.

<sup>15</sup> The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it.

<sup>16</sup> And you shall put into the ark the testimony that I shall give you.

<sup>17</sup> "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth.

<sup>18</sup> And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat.

<sup>19</sup> Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends.

<sup>20</sup> The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be.

<sup>21</sup> And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you.

<sup>22</sup> There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.

(Exo 25:9-22 ESV)

## AS IN HEAVEN, SO ON EARTH

In **Exodus 25:8** God tells Moses, “**Make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst.**” A sanctuary is a holy place where God dwells. In the Bible it can be a mountain, an ark, a garden, a temple, a tent, a nation, the church, or a person. We are about to embark on a study of the Sanctuary built by Moses called the **tabernacle**. This is one of the most fascinating topics in the whole Bible, and I am very much looking forward to preaching on it. There is no shortage of books written that try to explain the meaning and symbolism of the tabernacle. Some are very speculative. Others are more grounded in objective data. But any of them fall short *if* they do not have as their final goal helping us to better understand the Lord Jesus. As Jesus taught us, “**All things in Scripture concern himself.**” This includes the tabernacle. My goal is to help you see Christ here in something you may consider dry, boring instructions on how to build a house for God.

These instructions, however, are not dry and they are not boring if you know what you are looking at. This is tipped off in the very first words, “**Exactly as I show you**

concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it” (25:9). Moses was to do everything exactly as shown to him by God. These words are the foundation of a lively, exciting study of the tabernacle. They show us that Moses is not designing the tabernacle from his own **imagination**. They teach us that proper worship comes at the **instruction** of God. They help us to realize that worship in the earthly sanctuary must be done in such and such a way, because it is a **reflection** of something we cannot see, namely the worship and temple of God in heaven. If we blow it down here, then our worship will not reflect the true worship of the True God as he exists in heavenly places. Therefore, **it will not be accepted**. This is why Moses was commended as a great man of faith for doing everything exactly the way he was told to do it. **This theme will come up** many times as we work our way through these chapters in Exodus.

“**On earth as it is in heaven.**” I seem to use this phrase a lot lately. It is no more appropriate to talk about than here. Jesus tells us to pray this in the Lord’s Prayer. It is an ancient idea reflected in many different

cultures. **Plato** the Greek philosopher, believed that everything on earth had an archetype in heaven that he called a form. The form was the “pattern” of what comes into existence here on earth. That which is on earth is a tainted copy of the pure form in heaven. **Hebrews 8:5** seems to talk about the same thing that Plato discussed. The things of the Tabernacle “serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, ‘See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.’” Did you catch that? Hebrews is commenting on **Exodus 25:9**. Thus, it will be important at some point to **come back to this passage** to understand Exodus in light of Christ. For now, I just want you to notice that Hebrews connects the idea of doing everything as commanded to the idea that Jesus taught about things on earth reflecting things in heaven.

What I do not want you to do is think that Hebrews is getting this idea from Plato! Most ancient cultures had this idea. Perhaps they all did. Plato got it from them! The Babylonian creation story describes the high

god **Marduk's** temple this way, "He shall make on earth the counterpart of what he has brought to pass in heaven" (*EE* 6.113). In Egypt, Pharaoh **Ramses III** (a possible contemporary of Moses) wrote for his god, "I made for thee an august house in Nubia. . . the likeness of the heavens."<sup>1</sup>

The heavens themselves represent the invisible heaven, the place where God dwells. **Philo** wrote, "The whole universe must be regarded as the highest and, in truth, the holy temple of God" (*De spec. leg.* 1:66). Closer to home, the late **Meredith Kline** writes, "The heavens declare the glory of God in the special way that they are a copy of the archetypal Glory of God."<sup>2</sup> In other words, all that God has made is a teacher to show you about heavenly things. They explain things that you cannot see with your eyes because they are invisible. As the Psalmist puts it, "**They declare the glory of God**" (**Ps 19:1**).

Now if Hebrews is correct, if the Tabernacle and all of its furniture is a copy of things in heaven, then we *must* go looking for explanations and meaning in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Greg Beale, *Temple and the Church's Mission*, 51-52.

<sup>2</sup> Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 20ff.

symbolism. We must ask what does the ark represent? What is the Lampstand? Why are their angels in the curtain designs? Why is some of it a certain color? Why is some of it fashioned with gold etc?

## The ARK

Today I want to focus on that ark. First, let me describe it. It was a relatively **small box**: three feet nine inches long and two feet three inches wide and high. It is to be made of something called **acacia wood**. This is a desert wood which is extremely hard. It was overlain with pure **gold**, both inside and outside. It had a gold **rim** encircling its top and gold **rings** on the four corners so that it could be carried with **poles** which were overlain with gold. The poles were not to be removed from the ark.

The ark had a **lid** which was called the **mercy seat**. It was made of pure **gold**. On top of the lid were two **cherubim** of gold, hammered by a craftsman, and made to face each other on either end of the lid. The cherubim were given **wings** which were spread out so as

to overshadow the mercy seat. The ark became the most holy object in all of Israel's religion.

But what is the ark? What does it symbolize? What is the meaning of the lid and the angels and the gold and the shape and the box? We know a couple of things explicitly from the passage. First, the box was going to contain the “testimony” that God gave to Moses (25:16, 21). Thus, it is sometimes called the “ark of the testimony” (Ex 25:22). The “testimony” is a way of referring to the two stone tablets that Moses has just gone up to the mountain to receive. Thus, the ark is a kind of receptacle or container for the Commandments.

These tablets were the Ten Commandments or the laws of the covenant (Num 10:33). Thus, the ark is sometimes called the “ark of the covenant.” Other names for it include “the ark of God” (1 Sam 3:3); “The ark of the LORD God” (1 Kgs 2:26); “The holy ark” (2 Chr 35:3); and “the ark of [God's] strength” (Ps 132:8).

Second, it was from above the mercy seat and between the two cherubim that God would speak to Moses about the commandments that he has put into the box (Ex 25:22). This helps to explain the meaning



of the ark. While you may think of the ark merely as a beautiful container, it has all of the classic Ancient Near Eastern parts of a throne and footstool. How so?

Consider the following passages in light of God speaking “above” the mercy seat and between the angels. “The people brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim” (1 Sam 4:4). Hezekiah prays, “O LORD, enthroned above the cherubim, you are God alone” (2 Kgs 19:15). The Psalmist sings, “The LORD reigns; let the people’s tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake” (Psalm 99:1). Finally, the prophet Jeremiah says that a day is coming when “The ark of the covenant. . . shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed. . . at that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD” (Jer 3:16).

All ancient thrones needed **footstools**, a place for their feet to rest. Thus God says in Isaiah, “Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool” (Isa 66:1). In this



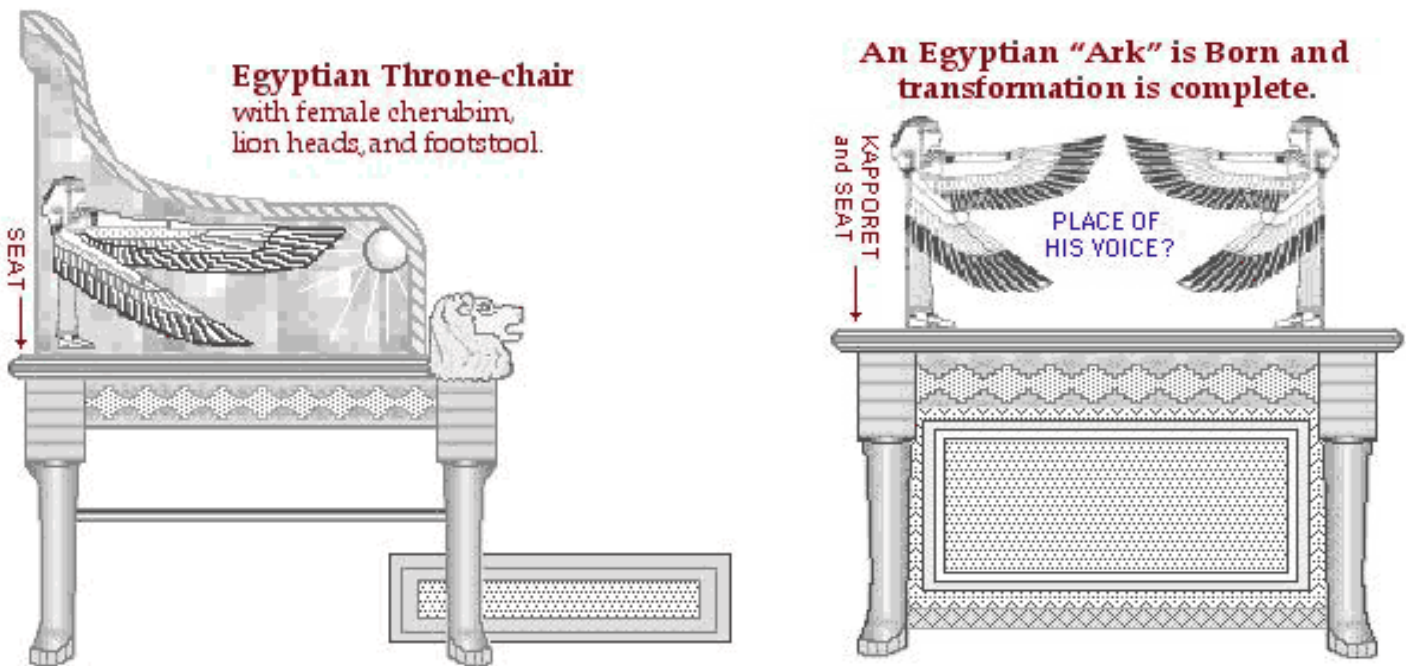
regard David says, “I had it in my heart to build a house or rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD and for the footstool of our God” (1 Chron 28:2). Psalm 132:7-8 says, “Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship at his footstool! Arise, O LORD, and go to your resting place, you and the ark of your might.”

Next notice that God tells Moses to first build the box, *then* to build the lid. They are two separate pieces, though they are intimately related. The box is the footstool and the lid is the throne. One of the best ways to see this is go online and view the spectacular find of King Tut’s throne and footstool. The footstool, while not a box (it has four legs like a table), has similar dimensions as the ark-box. Viewed from the front (in two dimensions) the stool gives the illusion of fitting under the throne, just like the box under the lid.



The real clincher is the throne. Tut's throne has two arms and on the outside of each arm is a giant winged creature. This was typical of all ancient Near Eastern Thrones. The idea is that the king sits enthroned between the winged beings. Note in this regard that we call the lid the mercy "seat." The king's throne is the place where people can find mercy. And so, while the ark and lid are not properly speaking a throne and footstool (because God is a spirit and has no body like

man), the symbolism is absolutely there for anyone who knows even the first bit about ancient thrones.



The Cherubim that are depicted in study bibles are usually given faces like men. However, they may have had faces like lions or the sphinx. Again on Tut's throne, the front legs had lion's heads. This is reminiscent of the Sphinx in Egypt, which in my opinion is to be dated to the time before the great flood.<sup>3</sup> It originally had the head of a lion, until one of the Pharaohs defaced it and put his own image on the

<sup>3</sup> Robert Bauval, *The Message of the Sphinx* (Three Rivers Press, 1997).

beast. This same feature depicting flying creatures with lion's heads is found in Babylon, Syro-Palestine, Phoenicia, the kingdom of the Amorites, and many more.<sup>4</sup> You see this in the design of Solomon's Temple where together he placed "cherubim, lions and palm trees" (1 Kgs 7:36). You see this in the depictions of heavenly beings by Ezekiel who have faces like lions (Ezek 1:10). Lion's represented guardians (like the Sphinx), as were Cherubim which is chiefly a designation of a heavenly guardian (Gen 3:24; Ezek 28:14, 16 etc). On the ark they are guarding the throne of God.

This also explains the purpose of the poles. The golden poles were used to carry the throne of the king. Ancient Near Eastern throne-chariots were carried by servants using poles. This is why it was such an abomination for Israel to be carrying it upon an ox-cart in the days of David, when Uzzah touched the ark as it

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<sup>4</sup> <http://sacrificium-laudis.blogspot.com/2010/01/minor-trivial-biblical-stuff-part-2-ark.html>



slipped and was killed. King's don't ride around on ox-carts!



This, then, is why God came to the Moses above the mercy seat and between the cherubim. Moses was coming to meet with his King. He was coming to receive instructions from the King, concerning all manner of things. Isn't this the title the LORD gives to himself in the days of Saul when he tells Samuel, "**Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being *king* over them**" (1 Sam 8:7)? The ark of the

covenant was the visible representation of Yahweh's throne and presence in their midst.

## **Noah's Ark and Ark of Covenant**

At this point, I want to do a little biblical theology. Biblical theology takes a theme of Scripture and traces its development. I want to be very narrowly focused here and look only at the idea of an ark, properly speaking. There are three “arks” in the Bible to my knowledge. This is the third and last mentioned in the Bible. The first is the more famous ark: Noah's Ark. The second is the a little boat that Moses was carried in to keep him safe from Pharaoh. We looked at the relationship between Moses' little boat and Noah's Ark back in Exodus 2. These are the only two vessels given the Hebrew name “*tebah*” in the Bible. The ark of the testimony is called an *arohn*.

The LXX gives us two different words for Noah's ark and Moses' boat (*kibotos* and *thibis*). However, it translates the ark of the covenant with *kibotos*, meaning

that the same Greek word is used for Noah's ark and the ark of the covenant. I believe that the Greek is reflecting something theological. The translators understood that in some sense the ark of the covenant was a little Noah's ark. Consider these two passages: **Ex 25:10**, "Make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height." **Genesis 6:14-15**, "Make yourself an ark of gopher wood. . . the length of the ark 300 cubits, its breadth 50 cubits, and its height 30 cubits." There is a **geometric relationship** that exists between the two arks. 1.5 is twenty times less than 30. 2.5 is twenty times less than 50. 1.5 is two hundred times less than 300. Putting it another way, you could fit exactly 80,000 Arks of the Covenant into Noah's Ark!

I will have more to say about sanctuaries when we come to the tabernacle building proper. **I'll talk more about Noah's ark then**, because it follows the basic three-tiered design of the tabernacle and other sanctuaries. For now, I believe it is important for you to see that the ark itself as a sanctuary. Sanctuaries are



places of divine mercy, as Adam discovered when God clothed him with animals skins in the garden-sanctuary, as Noah discovered when God saved him from the raging flood in the ark-sanctuary, as Moses discovered in the same way and so on. This is why fleeing criminals in the middle ages would seek “sanctuary” inside the church building. They were looking for mercy and protection.

This time it is not the “seat” that should come into your view with the ark of the covenant, but the *mercy* that is to be found at God’s feet. It is the “mercy” seat. It is the mercy seat that actually prefigures the most important part of our redemption. The Hebrew word is *kapporet*. Scholars have long tried to figure out the etymology of the word,<sup>5</sup> but one thing is certain. 200 years before Christ, the LXX translated it into this word: *hilasterion* from the Hebrew word *kaphar* (“to

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<sup>5</sup> Some suggest it is from an Egyptian word: *kp n rdwj* (“sole of the feet”) (note the footstool idea) or the Akkadian *kapāru* (“to purify cultically”).

cover” or “make atonement”).<sup>6</sup> This word gets at the heart of our faith.<sup>7</sup>

It means **propitiation**. You say, “That’s a big word, pastor. You shouldn’t use big words like that in a sermon.” At least, that’s what one of my professor’s at seminary told once said to us. But since I believe you are intelligent people capable of great amounts of learning with brains capable of holding vast amounts of knowledge, I figure I can define it for you and it will help your faith!

Have you ever heard of **Yom Kippur** (“Day of Atonement”)? This is a famous Jewish holiday still celebrated. Listen to that word *kippur* (*kpr*). It is the same as our word without the vowels: *kaphar* (*kpr*). A **propitiation** is closely related to an atonement. But, you ask, what is “atonement?” Think of it like this: **At-One-Ment**. **Atonement** provides the *legal* remedy of

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<sup>6</sup> Note the etymological idea: *kprt* comes from *kpr* (original Hebrew has no vowels).

<sup>7</sup> As do other related words like ransom (*kōphar*) and reconciliation (*kaphar*).

bringing those who are estranged or enemies into unity.<sup>8</sup>

The legal basis for God accepting sinners was taken care of at the cross.

Another word for atonement is “reconciliation.” I want you to understand something. Reconciliation does not occur at the cross, otherwise, no elect person would be born under God’s wrath. Atonement resolves the legal problem that brought hostility. Let me explain.

Here is the problem. We have sinned against God, the High King, maker of heaven and earth. You have sinned. I have sinned. How do we know? Because we have God’s law. This is symbolized in the Ark of the Covenant where the stone tablets were actually kept. In fact, records of some international treaties, similar to the covenant between Yawheh and Israel, were deposited into box-like containers, which were then placed at the feet of deities.<sup>9</sup> The ark contained the covenantal terms,

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<sup>8</sup> “Atonement,” New Bible Dictionary.

<sup>9</sup> Walton, “Ark” (Exodus 25:16), Exodus, ZIBBOC; R. de Vaux, “Ark of the Covenant and Tent of Reunion,” in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East*, trans. D. McHugh (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), 136–51; C. L. Seow, “Ark of the Covenant,” *ABD*, 1:388–89.

not only for Israel, but for all humanity (as I have explained in the Ten Commandments).

We were created to be God's stewards, his little-kings, to have dominion over his sanctuary, his footstool-the earth. Your sin and mind is a violation of our covenantal agreement, made with our representative in the Garden of Eden, but which is also made with each of us at our birth, as God writes the terms of the covenant upon our hearts of stone. That's why you feel guilty when you do something wrong. It is because you are guilty, guilty of breaking an agreement you had with God.

Your violation of the covenant thus creates a huge gulf between you and God. His anger is aroused, because he hates sin and impertinent arrogant violations of his goodwill towards us. The covenant is a *legal* arrangement with blessings and curses given for obedience and disobedience. Here, I want you to think of God's wrath as a bond that God has legally against

sin. He must have wrath against sin, and people must be estranged from him when they sin in order to preserve justice. God's wrath is his legal punishment for violating the agreement.

Thus, if the two parties are going to be reconciled, there must be a *legal* means of bringing about reconciliation. This is what atonement does. It removes the legal problem. Here is where propitiation comes into play. Propitiation appeases the wrath of God. It brings about the removal of wrath through the offering of a gift. In the OT, the gift is the sacrifice of the animal which is given in exchange for the removal of God's wrath. **More on this shortly.**

Do not fear that this is some kind of Arminian theology I'm giving you, for God always *applies* atonement and brings reconciliation to his elect by justifying them (a legal declaration of pardon) by granting them faith in Christ and repentance of sins. Nevertheless, as far as the *legal problem* between God

and his image bearers is concerned, he does not need to do anything more to rectify the hostility between himself and anyone. The blood that is spilt upon the mercy seat in the Day of Atonement *legally* covers all Israelites, even though all are not saved, because God does not grant them all faith.

## **Contents of Ark**

Here I want to visit one more part of the Ark. It concerns what which Hebrews says was original put into the ark along with the Law of the Covenant. These are a jar/pot of manna and Aaron's budding staff. These are important elements that go along with God's mercy. It explains the reason why he would grant faith to anyone. If God only kept the law inside the ark, all he would have to "remind" him of what to do with Israel is a legal document. But he puts two very special **means of grace** right there with the law to "remind" him that he is a God who delights in showing mercy and giving good gifts to his people.

The manna is the miracle food that we have talked about many times. It comes from heaven into a dry barren wilderness. It is given to feed the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. And it is most importantly, [a type of Christ](#), for he calls himself the bread come down out of heaven. Thus, the manna reminds God of the mercy of Christ which covers our transgressions against the law of the covenant.

The budding staff is a very interesting story. The story is found in the rebellion of [Korah](#) and 250 leaders in [Numbers 16-17](#). Korah rose up to challenge Moses authority. Moses was up to the challenge and God vindicated him by opening the ground which swallowed up Korah and the rebellious little demons who stood with him ([Num 16:32](#)). Then, fire came out of the ground and destroyed the 250 other rebels ([16:35](#)).

When Moses was accused of killing them all himself, he had Aaron take an almond rod from each



tribe with the name of the tribe engraved on it. The rod of the man God had chosen as high priest would blossom. They put all 12 rods before the Ark in the Most Holy Place. The next morning, **Aaron's rod budded**, blossomed, and yielded fruit. This was a miraculous “tree of life” that was raised back to life when it was surely dead. Here you can see Christ, the branch of Jesse, as well as the Holy Spirit who creates fruit in his people. The point of placing the rod before the ark-throne is that God remembers his chosen ones and desires to have such mercy upon them that he will bring cause them to have life when none was present. This is all part of the promise given to Abram that those of the spiritual seed of Isaac would forever be blessed.

There is one final problem. All of this is only **typological** in the OT. The ark is merely a type and shadow of something greater than itself. The highest heavens cannot contain God, and this is surely not his heavenly throne! This is why Jeremiah foresees a day

when **no will care any longer about the ark.** That day has come (contrary to many Evangelicals who act like Jews in this regard)! The manna is only a type, it is a picture of Christ who is in heaven. Aaron's rod is a prefiguration too. It eventually died and withered away, so that all that remained in the ark in the days of the kings was the stone law tablets. The gold, which is a metal pure above all, shining and brilliant like the God and stars of heaven, it is a type and not the reality. (In Egypt, gold was thought to be the 'flesh of the gods'). The box is only a picture of God's inexhaustible memory. He doesn't need a box to remind him of anything.

Let me return finally to the **Day of Atonement.** Hebrews is clear that it, too, is a type and shadow of something to come. On this day, once a year, the High Priest would enter into the tent and take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the **mercy seat** (on the east side). He would do

this seven times. Then he was to kill a goat and do the same thing with its blood. When finished, the sins of the people would be atoned.

But Hebrews says something better has happened, because the blood of bulls and goats cannot “take away” sins (they can only “cover” them, hence the word *kpr* which can also be translated as a “covering”). We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ “once for all” (**Heb 10:10**). This sprinkling of blood refers, in the context, directly to the day of atonement where the blood was placed upon the ark of the covenant.

How can Jesus do this? It is because “his blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (**Heb 12:24**). It is because he has entered into the heavenly sanctuary. Hebrews says that the heavenly things had to be purified with the very blood of Christ, who entered into heaven itself when he offered his body and died on the cross (**Heb 9:23**). It is because he is the ark of the

covenant. Don't look to copies and shadows of Christ, beloved. What will it gain you even if they did find the ark of the tabernacle hidden away in some monastery in Ethiopia? It may be a very beautiful thing, but it is nothing compared to the beauty of our Saviour.

As Revelation says, “The temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple” (Rev 11:19). How did the ark get in heaven? I guarantee they didn't put dynamite under it like an anvil in the old west and see if they could launch it up there. Rather, the ark he is talking about is the archetype. It is that to which the copy points. It is God's throne, the place upon which Jesus now sits, above the cherubim, in brilliant sparkling light, making intercession for the saints, teaching us his law, opening the way to the tree of life, and feeding us with the very food of heaven.