

WE ARE THE TEMPLE OF THE LIVING GOD

THE ARK: A MOBILE "SANCTUARY" THAT REJECTS INSTITUTIONALIZED WORSHIP SITES

This narrative suggests that the institutionalization of the Israelite cult by "housing" the Ark in a temple is, like the monarchy itself, actually a sign of decline and compromise.

ARK OF THE ACCOMPANIMENT

by CHED MYERS

Note: This is the second of a two part series on the Bible and Temple-religion. Part One, "And I Saw No Temple in the City: The Biblical Suspicion of Imperial Architecture," appeared in the August 1996 issue.

The history of culture suggests that one of the most primal human impulses is to try to institutionalize the divine presence in a sacred place, a shrine, or a cult. When such sites are established, a second impulse invariably follows: the cult becomes identified with political and/or economic attempts by powerful groups to consolidate their power within or among communities.

This represents the oldest and most ironic formula embodied in human religion: sacred sites that are supposed to mediate salvation and blessing also end up mediating the relations of power of the dominant culture. And it explains why early Israel, as an experiment in collective human freedom and dignity, was wary of official cults.

In the first article of this series I focused on the Bible's antipathy towards temples, which in the thinking of free Israel represented the architecture of domination. I also summarized the function of cultic sites in securing loyalty and in collecting agricultural taxes in the an-

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cient Canaanite/Egyptian tributary system. The political-economic character of shrines and sacrificial cults lay behind Israel's struggle against "idolatry."

A vivid expression of Israel's repudiation of Canaanite shrines is found in the story of Gideon (Judges 6). The narrator sets the scene with an Egypt-like description of Israel's oppression by the Midianites (vv 1-10). This is followed by the Moses-like commissioning of a skeptical Gideon to rehabilitate Israel's struggle for liberation (vv 12-14).

Gideon is introduced as someone already involved in resistance to the Midianites, covertly harvesting his crop so it won't be confiscated (v 11; see v 4). "Concealment is a form of protest," writes James Kennedy in

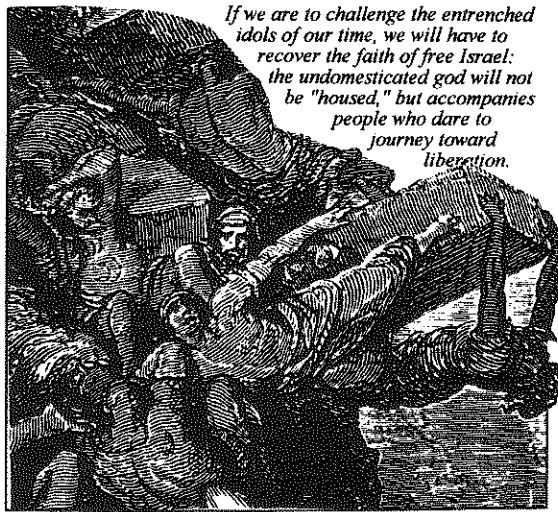
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Dore: The Walls of Jericho Falling Down

GOD'S PRESENCE IS

MEDIATED BY JUSTICE

THE ARK: A MOBILE SANCTUARY



If we are to challenge the entrenched idols of our time, we will have to recover the faith of free Israel: the undomesticated god will not be "housed," but accompanies people who dare to journey toward liberation.

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an article entitled "The Social Background of Early Israel's Rejection of Cultic Images." "By threshing his wheat in hiding, Gideon is following the typical practice of rebellious peasants who seek ways to hide their produce from the authorities."

After his encounter with the angel of Yahweh, Gideon is further emboldened in his resistance. He sacrifices on an "unauthorized altar"; the offering is thus consumed, not by Canaanite priests but by Yahweh, *in a haze of fire* (vv 11-24). Gideon is next instructed to pull down the altar of Baal and Asherah (apparently this refers to the totem of the female consort of Baal), further escalating the conflict (v 26). He then makes another insurgent offering to Yahweh on that site (vv 26f).

Gideon is accused of sabotage by the local people who, no doubt, fear retaliation by the Canaanite overlords. But he is defended by Joash, who echoes the classic Israelite taunt to idol-systems: "If Baal is god, let him contend for himself" (vv 28-31). The episode ends with Gideon (whose name in Hebrew means "to cut down") assuming the taunt as his revolutionary moniker: Jerubbabel means "Let Baal sue" (v 32).

Kennedy points out that Gideon's iconoclastic action is related to his initial protest: "The lack of a consecrated image at a cultic site would tend to discourage agents of the state from seeking and confiscating agricultural goods that supported the idol." It is hardly surprising that Midianite retaliation comes immediately (v 33). This in turn commences the narrative of the burgeoning popular insurrection under Gideon's leadership (vv 34ff).

Israel's alternative to the established cultic sites within the Egyptian/Canaanite sphere of domination was a portable shrine called "the Ark of the covenant" (see Ex 25). In *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* Norman Gottwald describes this Ark as

a wooden chest that appears to have represented the presence of Yahweh in the form of a pedestal or throne for the imageless deity. It is also conceived as a repository for tablets containing the Decalogue. It had a

function to accompany the Israelites in battle, serving as a palladium, that is, a sacred object with the power to safeguard those who possessed it.

It may be that this "sanctuary" (Ex 25:8)—in fact little more than a glorified suitcase—was meant to parody the ornate institutional shrines of the surrounding vassal tribes. In any case, it symbolized God's "accompaniment" with the people on their freedom march.

The Ark also had a political function. As a cultic war piece it expressed the conviction that Yahweh, not military weaponry or stratagems, won battles for Israel (see e.g. Josh 3, 6). The empty throne sitting atop the Ark (called "the mercy seat" in Ex 25 and Lev 16) represented Israel's revolutionary tribal confederacy: this body politic had no king on the throne, because Yahweh was king.

First Samuel 4 narrates the Philistines' defeat of Eli's tribal coalition and capture of the Ark. The biblical narratives clearly identify the Philistines as the most stubborn military and political threat to the Israelite confederacy. Gottwald notes that the Philistines were probably installed in Canaan as vassals by Egypt in order to buttress the latter's imperial control over the region:

By 1050 B.C.E. [they] were posing a serious threat to the mountainous heartland of Israel. The Philistines had the advantage of oligarchic leadership... and their iron weaponry and mobile strike force made them effective fighters in the hill country. Apparently the aim of the Philistine lords was to force Israel to become their agricultural producers under a tributary relationship.

Gottwald believes that Israel's integration into the feudal grid system of Philistia would have spelled doom for her own autonomous institutions—a virtual return to bondage in Egypt. This may be reflected in the account of the Ark's captivity in Ashdod, because the narrative echoes God's judgments on Pharaoh (1 Sam 5:6ff; 6:6). Yet the story is full of satire.

The Philistine cult is parodied, as the image of the god Dagon "cannot stand" next to the captive Ark (5:1-5). The residents of Ashdod are inflicted with tumors, and so the Ark is moved to Gath and Ekron, where the judgment is repeated (5:6-12). Finally the Philistine elders send the Ark packing homeward with a guilt offering of five "golden

tumors and five gold mice" (6:1-6), possibly a wry allusion by the Israelite storyteller to the five Philistine city-states that exercised hegemony in the region (6:17f). The Ark, for its part, returns "on its own" to Israel (6:7-16).

But the Ark is not only hard on non-Israelite power-mongers. The story of the Ark's removal by the upstart king David to his newly-founded imperial center in Jerusalem in II Samuel 6 reflects the tradition's ambivalence about the monarchy. The narrative begins and concludes with David and the congregation dancing and celebrating before the Ark (vv 5, 14f). But this triumphant entry into the city spells the end of David's stormy relationship with Michal, his rival Saul's daughter (v 16).

The narrative posits a rather strained relationship between David and the Ark. When Uzzah is killed for reaching out to steady the Ark, David becomes both angry and fearful and refuses to become steward of such a dangerous force (vv 6-10). But when he observes that the Ark brings blessing to the house of Obededom, he covets it again and brings it up to the "city of David" (vv 11f). Does David want the Ark only insofar as it serves his ends?

David immediately begins to feel uncomfortable that he lives in a nice house while the Ark dwells in a tent (7:1f; see 5:11). Joel Rosenberg, in *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible*, has pointed out that this story articulates considerable irony in the semantic interplay between clan "houses" and the "house" of God. The houses of Eli, Samuel, and Saul have risen and fallen according to their fidelity to God. Nor is all well in David's household, since his wife Michal scorns the fact that he has brought the Ark to the south, thus scuttling the possibility of bringing the "houses" of Saul and David together in peace (6:16, 20-23). And David will take his first fall by invading the "house" of Uriah and Bathsheba (II Sam 11). David's home, Rosenberg concludes, "is a haunted house—visited by the memory of houses that have fallen, warned by proverbial examples of unfulfilled househood."

Nathan, who will later unmask David's murderous adultery (II Sam

12), delivers an oracle to the king that is decidedly ambiguous (7:4-17). The first part of the message, with its sharp rhetorical questions, repudiates David's pretensions to build God a house, reminding him that no king can "control" the shrine of the undomesticated God (7:5-7). And though the second part switches to classic covenant language (vv 8f), affirming that Israel is now "planted" in a place (vv 10f), there is nevertheless an insistence that this is God's construction project, not David's (see Ps 127:1).

The third part of the oracle then breaks the bad news to David that it will not be him but his offspring who will "build a house for my name" (vv 12-16).

This narrative suggests that the institutionalization of the Israelite cult by "housing" the Ark in a Temple is, like the monarchy itself, actually a sign of decline and compromise. Indeed it was David's imperial ambitions that "captured" the Ark, and once this symbol of the old wilderness tradition is eclipsed by the grandeur and centralized power of the Temple, it is little wonder

that the Ark eventually disappears from the biblical narrative altogether (see II Chron 35:3). Thereafter it would be up to prophets such as Jeremiah to remind Israel that God's presence is mediated by justice, not by institutionalized cultic centers.

Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the Lord are these buildings." No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between people, if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow other gods, to your own hurt—then only will I let you dwell in this place. Do you consider this house, which bears my name, to be a den of thieves? As for me, I have been watching, declares the Lord. Just go to my place at Shiloh where I had established my name formerly, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of my people Israel. (Jer 7:4-7, 11-13, JPS)

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, the earliest encyclical in church history, the writer describes Christ's work of reconciliation on the cross as "tearing down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:14). This wall is here equated with the enmity that divides Jew and Gentile and that is enforced by the "statutory Law." Does its dismantling allude to Ez 13:14, where a "whitewashed" wall represents the false hopes of those who proclaim peace when there is no peace? Does it refer to the five-foot wall that separated the Outer Court of the Gentiles from the rest of the Jerusalem Temple? Or is it a faint echo of Jesus' vow to bring down the Temple, stone by stone (Mk 13:2; see Part One of this series)?

This text is germane to our discussion because the writer immediately moves to a "reconstructive" alternative:

You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the keystone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together in the Spirit into a dwelling place for God. (Eph 2:19-22)

As Markus Barth puts it, "Those who have been received into God's house are no longer described as its inhabitants in what follows; rather they are declared the building materials."

This is another example of the New Testament's clear repudiation of the Temple as cultic center. Instead, the community is the place where God dwells: "We are the Temple of the living God," said Paul (II Cor 6:16). According to Ephesians 2, it is reconciliation between enemies, not architectural grandeur, that is the precondition for God's presence.

The Christian church long ago abandoned the legacy of Gideon for the age-old religion of institutionalized cults. But as the recent Catholic Worker action tried to argue, it is biblical nonsense to build ornate cathedrals for God while God's poor are homeless. If we are to challenge the entrenched idols of our time, we will have to recover the faith of free Israel: the undomesticated God will not be "housed," but accompanies a people who dare to journey toward liberation. □

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