

Ark of the Covenant

Overview

The Ark consists of two main parts. Its lower half was a chest formed from wood and gold which contained the "עֵדוּת" (testimony), while its upper half was a cover of solid gold upon which stood the "כְּרֻבִים" (cherubs). Attached to the chest were a golden crown and gold rings through which were placed gilded wooden poles. Each and every feature of the Ark is the subject of controversy amongst the commentators, and many of these issues will be discussed below.

The Chest

Shemot 25:10-11 states that the chest of the Ark was made out of wood which was covered on both the inside and outside by gold. Despite the apparent clarity of these verses, there is a major disagreement between exegetes regarding the structure of the Ark and the nature of the gold covering. This dispute also has ramifications for understanding the relationship to the verses of Devarim 10:1-3 which refer to a wooden ark made by Moshe.

A Single Wooden Chest Plated with Gold Leaf

SOURCES: Josephus, Resh Lakish, Ibn Ezra

"וְצִפִּיתָ אֹתוֹ זָהָב טָהוֹר מִבֵּית וּמִחוּץ תִּצְפֶּנּוּ" – This position would appear to be the simple interpretation of this verse and the verb "וְצִפִּיתָ".¹

The wooden ark of Devarim 10:1-3 – Ibn Ezra is able to easily explain that the Ark in Devarim is identical with the Ark of the Tabernacle, as each was made primarily of wood. For elaboration, see How Many Arks.

The weight of the Ark – Ibn Ezra argues that the Ark could not have contained more than one box, as additional boxes of pure gold would have been both too heavy to carry² and would have required more gold than the nation collected.

Three Chests – Inner and Outer Chests of Gold and a Middle Chest of Wood

SOURCES: Baraita DeMelekheth HaMishkan, R. Chanina, Rav Yehuda in Bavli Yoma, Rashi

"וְצִפִּיתָ אֹתוֹ זָהָב טָהוֹר מִבֵּית וּמִחוּץ תִּצְפֶּנּוּ" – This position explains that the wooden box was surrounded by two gold boxes.³

The wooden ark of Devarim 10:1-3 – Both Rashi and Ramban explain that the wooden chest described in Devarim is distinct from the golden ark of the Tabernacle, and refers to a second ark which would be taken to battle.⁴ See How Many Arks.

Why gold? This approach may be motivated by a desire to not have the Ark be made out of a less valuable material than other items which were made of pure gold.⁵

Why not pure gold? R. Yosef Bekhor Shor explains that the middle chest was made from wood because the Ark was to be carried on the Levites shoulders and it would have been too heavy if all the layers were of solid gold.

Rings and Legs

Shemot 25:12 provides the following instructions:

וַיִּצְקֶה לּוֹ אַרְבַּע טְבַעֲתֵי זָהָב וְנִתְּתָה עַל אַרְבַּע פַּעֲמֹתָיו וְשֵׁתִי טְבַעֲת עַל צִלְעוֹ הָאַחַת וְשֵׁתִי טְבַעֲת עַל צִלְעוֹ הַשְּׁנִיָּה.

Commentators disagree whether the four rings mentioned in the first half of the verse are the same as the four (two plus two) rings mentioned in the second half of the verse. They also disagree about the placement of the various rings and regarding the meaning of the word "פַּעֲמֹתָיו".

Four Rings and No Legs

The Ark had only four rings attached to its corners, and it rested straight on the ground with no need for any legs.

SOURCES: Rashi

"פַּעֲמֹתָיו" – Onkelos and Rashi interpret this word to mean corners. Shadal attempts to bring support for this from the only other occurrence of the word in Melakhim I 7:30 "וְאַרְבַּעַה פַּעֲמֹתָיו כְּתִפַּת לָהֶם" and its parallel in 7:34 which replaces "פַּעֲמֹתָיו" with "פְּנוֹת".

"אַרְבַּע טְבַעֲת...וְשֵׁתִי טְבַעֲת" – Rashi claims that the "ו" of "וְשֵׁתִי" is superfluous, and that the second half of the verse is merely a restatement of its first half.

The height of the rings – Rashi maintains that the four rings were placed on the corners near the top of the Ark. Ramban, though, disagrees and says that the four rings were attached lower down, and thus the Ark was more visible when it was carried.

Eight Rings and Four Legs

The Ark had four rings attached to its legs, and an additional two rings on each of two sides.

SOURCES: Ibn Ezra

"פַּעֲמֹתָיו" – Ibn Ezra equates the feminine form found in our verse with the masculine form "פַּעַם" found in several other verses with the meaning of leg.⁶ He suggests that the Ark must have had legs as it would have been disrespectful to place it directly on the ground.

"אַרְבַּע טְבַעֲת...וְשֵׁתִי טְבַעֲת" – Ibn Ezra proves from the extra "ו" that there were an additional four (two plus two) rings besides the four mentioned in the first half of the verse.

The height of the rings and the poles – Ibn Ezra suggests that the poles to carry the Ark were placed in the four upper rings, and that the four lower rings were purely decorative in nature.⁷

Eight Rings and No Legs

SOURCES: Tosafot Yoma, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor

Contents of the Ark

In both Shemot 25:16 and 25:21, Hashem commands Moshe to put the "תָּבַח" in the Ark. Commentators disagree as far as the identity of this "תָּבַח" and the reason for the duplication of the command. A number of additional verses are important for this issue. Devarim 10:1-5 recount how Moshe placed the Tablets in an ark,⁸ Melakhim I 8:9 makes explicit that the Ark contained only the Tablets and nothing else, and Devarim 31:26 appears to indicate that Moshe's copy of the Torah was placed next to the Ark but not inside it. Nevertheless, exegetes debate where Moshe's Torah was housed and what was contained in the Ark.

Only the Tablets

SOURCES: R. Yehuda, Ibn Ezra

Both the Tablets and the Torah

SOURCES: R. Meir, Rashi, Abarbanel

¹ See Ibn Ezra who brings a proof from the parallel usage of the verb צָפַח in Melakhim I Chapter 6.

² See also Abarbanel.

³ According to R. Avraham b. HaRambam, the three boxes were attached to each other, while according to the Maharal they remained separate entities.

⁴ This follows the opinion of R. Yehuda b. Lakish.

⁵ Cf. Ralbag who suggests that mere gold leaf would not have been durable enough, and see also Cassuto. Interestingly, Ralbag seems to maintain a similar position regarding the Shulchan.

⁶ He cites verses from Shir HaShirim 7:2 and Yeshayahu 26:6.

⁷ Ramban cites Ibn Ezra as taking the exact opposite position that the poles to carry the Ark were placed in the lower rings.

⁸ See above regarding the dispute over whether this ark is the same as the Ark of the Tabernacle.

