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Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant

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Why do Catholics call [Mary](#) the Ark of the New Covenant? Answering that question will take us on a thrilling journey through the Old and New Testaments.

For example, Luke wove some marvelous things into his Gospel that only a knowledgeable Jew would have understood—a Jew who knew Jewish Scripture and had eyes to see and ears to hear. One of the things he would have understood is typology.

We all know that the [Old Testament](#) is full of stories, people, and historical events. A *type* is a person, thing, or event in the Old Testament that foreshadows something in the [New Testament](#). It is like a taste or a hint of something that will be fulfilled or realized. Types are like pictures that come alive in a new and exciting way when seen through the eyes of Christ's revelation. Augustine said that “the Old Testament is the New concealed, but the New Testament is the Old revealed” (*Catechizing of the Uninstructed* 4:8).

The idea of typology is not new. Paul says that Adam was a type of the one who was to come—Christ (Rom 5:14). Early Christians understood that the Old Testament was full of types or pictures that were fulfilled or realized in the New Testament.

Here are a few more examples of biblical typology:

- Peter uses Noah's ark as a type of Christian baptism (1 Pt 3:18-22).
- Paul explains that circumcision foreshadowed Christian baptism (Col 2:11-12).
- Jesus uses the bronze serpent as a type of his Crucifixion (Jn 3:14; cf. Nm 21:8-9).
- The Passover lamb prefigures the sacrifice of Christ (1 Cor 5:7).
- Paul says that Abraham “considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back” (Heb 11:19).

The Ark of the Old Covenant

God loved his people and wanted to be close to them. He chose to do so in a very special way. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “The prayer of the people of God flourished in the shadow of the dwelling place of God's presence on earth, the ark of the covenant and the temple, under the guidance of their shepherds, especially King David, and of the prophets” (CCC 2594). God instructed Moses to build a tabernacle surrounded by heavy curtains (cf. Ex 25-27). Within the tabernacle he was to place an ark made of acacia wood covered with gold inside and out. Within the Ark of the Covenant was placed a golden jar holding the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant (cf. Heb 9:4).

When the ark was completed, the glory cloud of the Lord (the *Shekinah* Glory) covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:34-35; Nm 9:18, 22). The verb for “to cover” or “to overshadow” and the metaphor of a cloud are used in the Bible to represent the presence and glory of God. The *Catechism* explains:

In the theophanies of the Old Testament, the cloud, now obscure, now luminous, reveals the living and saving God, while veiling the transcendence of his glory—with Moses on Mount Sinai, at the tent of meeting, and during the wandering in the desert, and with Solomon at the dedication of the temple. In the Holy Spirit, Christ fulfills these figures. The Spirit comes upon the Virgin Mary and “overshadows” her, so that she might conceive and give birth to Jesus. On the mountain of Transfiguration, the Spirit in the “cloud came and overshadowed” Jesus, Moses and Elijah, Peter, James and John, and “a voice came out of the cloud, saying, ‘This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!’” Finally, the cloud took Jesus out of the sight of the disciples on the day of his Ascension and will reveal him as Son of Man in glory on the day of his final coming. The glory of the Lord “overshadowed” the ark and filled the tabernacle. (CCC 697)

It's easy to miss the parallel between the Holy Spirit overshadowing the ark and the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary, between the Ark of the Old Covenant as the dwelling place of God and Mary as the new dwelling place of God.

God was very specific about every exact detail of the ark (Ex 25-30). It was a place where God himself would dwell (Ex 25:8). God wanted his words—inscribed on stone—housed in a perfect container covered with pure gold within and without. How much more would he want his Word—Jesus—to have a perfect dwelling place! If the only begotten Son were to take up residence in the womb of a human girl, would he not make her flawless?

The Virgin Mary is the living shrine of the Word of God, the Ark of the New and Eternal Covenant. In fact, St. Luke's account of the Annunciation of the angel to Mary nicely incorporates the images of the tent of meeting with God in Sinai and of the temple of Zion. Just as the cloud covered the people of God marching in the desert (cf. Nm 10:34; Dt 33:12; Ps 91:4) and just as the same cloud, as a sign of the divine mystery present in the midst of Israel, hovered over the Ark of the Covenant (cf. Ex 40:35), so now the shadow of the Most High envelops and penetrates the tabernacle of the New Covenant that is the womb of Mary (cf. Lk 1:35). (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, *The Shrine: Memory, Presence and Prophecy of the Living God*)

King David and Elizabeth

Luke weaves additional parallels into the story of Mary—types that could be overlooked if one is unfamiliar with the Old Testament. After Moses died, Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. Joshua established the Ark of the Covenant in Shiloh, where it stayed for more than 200 years. One day the Israelites were losing a battle with the Philistines, so they snatched the ark and rushed it to the front lines. The Philistines captured the ark, but it caused them great problems, so they sent it back to Israel (1 Sm 5:1-6:12).

David went out to retrieve the ark (1 Sm 6:1-2). After a man named Uzzah was struck dead when he touched the ark, David was afraid and said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" He left the ark in the hill country of Judea for three months. We are also told that David danced and leapt in front of the ark and everyone shouted for joy. The house of Obed-edom, which had housed the ark, was blessed, and then David took the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sm 6:9-14).

Compare David and the ark to Luke's account of the Visitation:

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." (Lk 1:39-45)

- Mary arose and went to the hill country of Judea. I have been to both Ein Kerem (where Elizabeth lived) and Abu Ghosh (where the ark resided), and they are only a short walk apart. Mary and the ark were both on a journey to the same hill country of Judea.
- When David saw the ark he rejoiced and said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" Elizabeth uses almost the same words: "Why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Luke is telling us something—drawing our minds back to the Old Testament, showing us a parallel.
- When David approached the ark he shouted out and danced and leapt in front of the ark. He was wearing an ephod, the clothing of a priest. When Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant, approached Elizabeth, John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb—and John was from the priestly line of Aaron. Both leapt and danced in the presence of the ark. The Ark of the Old Covenant remained in the house of Obed-edom for three months, and Mary remained in the house of Elizabeth for three months. The place that housed the ark for three months was blessed, and in the short paragraph in Luke, Elizabeth uses the word blessed three times. Her home was certainly blessed by the presence of the ark and the Lord within.
- When the Old Testament ark arrived—as when Mary arrived—they were both greeted with shouts of joy. The word for the cry of Elizabeth's greeting is a rare Greek word used in connection with Old Testament liturgical ceremonies that were centered around the ark and worship (cf. *Word Biblical Commentary*, 67). This word would flip on the light switch for any knowledgeable Jew.
- The ark returns to its home and ends up in Jerusalem, where God's presence and glory is revealed in the temple (2 Sm 6:12; 1 Kgs 8:9-11). Mary returns home and eventually ends up in Jerusalem, where she presents God incarnate in the temple (Lk 1:56; 2:21-22).

It seems clear that Luke has used typology to reveal something about the place of Mary in salvation history. In the Ark of the Old Covenant, God came to his people with a spiritual presence. In the Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant, God comes to dwell with his people.

The Old Testament tells us that one item was placed inside the Ark of the Old Covenant while in the Sinai wilderness: God told Moses to put the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments inside the ark (Dt 10:3-5). Hebrews 9:4 informs us that two additional items were placed in the Ark: “a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded.” Notice the amazing parallels: In the ark was the law of God inscribed in stone; in Mary’s womb was the Word of God in flesh. In the ark was the urn of manna, the bread from heaven that kept God’s people alive in the wilderness; in Mary’s womb is the Bread of Life come down from heaven that brings eternal life. In the ark was the rod of Aaron, the proof of true priesthood; in Mary’s womb is the true priest. In the third century, St. Gregory the Wonder Worker said that Mary is truly an ark—“gold within and gold without, and she has received in her womb all the treasures of the sanctuary.”

While the apostle John was exiled on the island of Patmos, he wrote something that would have shocked any first-century Jew. The ark of the Old Covenant had been lost for centuries—no one had seen it for about 600 years. But in Revelation 11:19, John makes a surprising announcement: “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple.”

At this point chapter 11 ends and chapter 12 begins. But the Bible was not written with chapter divisions—they were added in the 12th century. When John penned these words, there was no division between chapters 11 and 12; it was a continuing narrative.

What did John say immediately after seeing the Ark of the Covenant in heaven? “And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child” (Rv 12:1-2). The woman is Mary, the Ark of the Covenant, revealed by God to John. She was seen bearing the child who would rule the world with a rod of iron (Rv 12:5). Mary was seen as the ark and as a queen.

But does this passage really refer to Mary? Some say the woman represents Israel or the Church, and certainly she does. John’s use of rich symbolism is well known, but it is obvious from the Bible itself that the woman is Mary. The Bible begins with a real man (Adam), a real woman (Eve), and a real serpent (the devil)—and it also ends with a real man (Jesus, the Last Adam [1 Cor 15:45]), a real woman (Mary, the New Eve [Rv 11:19-12:2]), and a real serpent (the devil of old). All of this was foretold in Genesis 3:15.

John Henry Cardinal Newman wrote about this passage in Revelation:

What I would maintain is this, that the Holy Apostle would not have spoken of the Church under this particular image unless there had existed a Blessed Virgin Mary, who was exalted on high and the object of veneration to all the faithful. No one doubts that the “man-child” spoken of is an allusion to our Lord; why then is not “the Woman” an allusion to his mother? (*On the Blessed Virgin Mary*)

Later in the same chapter we read that the devil went out to persecute the woman’s other offspring—Christians—which certainly seems to indicate that Mary is somehow the mother of the Church (Rv 12:17).

Even if someone rejects Catholic teaching regarding Mary, he cannot deny that Catholics have scriptural foundations for it. And it is a teaching that has been taught by Christians from ancient times. Here are a few representative quotations from the early Church—some written well before the New Testament books were officially compiled into the final New Testament canon:

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373) was the main defender of the deity of Christ against the second-century heretics. He wrote: “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*).

Gregory the Wonder Worker (c. 213–c. 270) wrote: “Let us chant the melody that has been taught us by the inspired harp of David, and say, ‘Arise, O Lord, into thy rest; thou, and the ark of thy sanctuary.’ For the Holy Virgin is in truth an ark, wrought with gold both within and without, that has received the whole treasury of the sanctuary” (Homily on the Annunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* echoes the words from the earliest centuries: “Mary, in whom the Lord himself has just made his dwelling, is the daughter of Zion in person, the Ark of the Covenant, the place where the glory of the Lord dwells. She is ‘the dwelling of God . . . with men’” (CCC 2676).

The early Christians taught the same thing that the Catholic Church teaches today about Mary, including her being the Ark of the New Covenant.

SIDEBARS

Mary, the Ark As Revealed in Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth

Golden Box: Ark of the Old Covenant	Mary: Ark of the New Covenant
The ark traveled to the house of Obed-edom in the hill country of Judea (2 Sam. 6:1-11).	Mary traveled to the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39).
Dressed as a priest, David danced and leapt in front of the ark (2 Sam. 6:14).	John the Baptist – of priestly lineage – leapt in his mother’s womb at the approach of Mary (Luke 1:41).

David asks, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sam. 6:9).	Elizabeth asks, "Why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43).
David shouts in the presence of the ark (2 Sam. 6:15).	Elizabeth "exclaimed with a loud cry" in the presence of the Mary (Luke 1:42).
The ark remained in the house of Obed-edom for three months (2 Sam. 6:11).	Mary remained in the house of Elizabeth for three months (Luke 1:56).
The house of Obed-edom was blessed by the presence of the ark (2 Sam. 6:11).	The word <i>blessed</i> is used three times; surely the house was blessed by God (Luke 1:39-45).
The ark returns to its home and ends up in Jerusalem, where God's presence and glory is revealed in the temple (2 Sam. 6:12; 1 Kgs. 8:9-11).	Mary returns home and eventually ends up in Jerusalem, where she presents God incarnate in the temple (Luke 1:56; 2:21-22).

Mary as the Ark Revealed by Items inside the Ark

Inside the Ark of the Old Covenant	Inside Mary, Ark of the New Covenant
The stone tablets of the law – the word of God inscribed on stone	The body of Jesus Christ – the word of God in the flesh
The urn filled with manna from the wilderness – the miraculous bread come down from heaven	The womb containing Jesus, the bread of life come down from heaven (John 6:41)
The rod of Aaron that budded to prove and defend the true high priest	The actual and eternal High Priest

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