

Worshiping the King

Reflections on Leviticus and the Birth of Christ

Matthew 2:2 “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ...

⁸ “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”

(Matt 2:2, 8)

Leviticus 9:24 And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

^{10:1} Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them.

² And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.”

(Lev 9:24-10:2)

Ark the Herald Angels Sing

I’ve recently been reminded of a very old idea, one that many Church Fathers taught and believed. It is the idea of **Mary as the ark of the new covenant**. This fits in with so much of what we have seen of typology in the fulfillment of the new covenant. Athanasius (296-373), the famous African defender of Trinitarianism called Mary the “**Ark of the**

Covenant, clothed with purity instead of gold ... the Ark in which is found the golden vessel containing the True Manna, that is, the flesh in which Divinity resides.” (Athanasius, *Homily of the Papyrus of Turin*).

Hippolytus (c. 170-c. 236) wrote, “At that time, the Savior coming from the Virgin, the Ark, brought forth His own Body into the world from that Ark, which was gilded with pure gold within by the Word, and without by the Holy Ghost” (Hippolytus, *In Dan.vi.*, Patr. Gr., Tom. 10, p. 648)

Chrysippus called her, “Not that ark wherein were all kinds of animals, as in the ark of Noah, which escaped the shipwreck of the whole drowning world. Not that ark in which were the tables of stone, as in the ark that journeyed in company with Israel throughout the desert; but an ark whose architect and inhabitant, pilot and merchant, companion of the way, and leader, was the Creator of all creatures, all which He bears in Himself, but by all is not contained” (Chrysippus, *Orat. de laudib. Deip*).

And Ambrose (c. 339-397) said, “For this cause did the prophet David dance before the Ark. And what shall we say is the Ark, but holy Mary? For as the Ark bore within it the tables of the Testament, so Mary bore the Heir of the same

Testament: it preserved within it the Law, she the Gospel; it had the voice, she the word, of God. The Ark, moreover, was radiant within and without with the shining of gold, whilst holy Mary gleamed within and without with the splendor of virginity; it was adorned with earthly gold, she with heavenly” (Ambrose, *Serm. xlii.*, Int. Opp. S. Ambrose.¹

Ambrose is particularly important for something I want to begin this sermon talking about. That is, how Luke’s Gospel seems very much to parallel the opening of Matthew and John by equating Jesus’ coming to us through the use of a typology from the OT (see n. 1). That typology is the story of the ark of the covenant in 2 Samuel 6.

Foolishness Near the Ark

In that story, David mustered 30,000 men and went to bring up the ark of God (2). They brought the ark on a cart

¹ These and other quotations are found in Thomas Livius, *The Blessed Virgin in the Fathers of the First Six Centuries* (Burns and Oakes, 1893). Many more are reproduced at “Church Fathers on Mary as Ark of the New Covenant,” *Catholic Fidelity*, <https://www.catholicfidelity.com/apologetics-topics/mary/church-fathers-on-mary-as-ark-of-the-new-covenant/>. Unfortunately, Protestants have not done a lot of homework on this subject. Because of their high (I would say hyper) views of Mary, they are naturally drawn towards the typology. But even though many of the Fathers say things about Mary that I would disagree with, even in some of these quotations, I see nothing sinister about a Mary-ark typology, any more than I do a Jesus-Moses (Matthew 2-7) typology or a Jesus-new creation (John 1-2) typology.

to the house of Abinadab the **priest** (3). But because it was on a cart, it became unsteady, and one of his sons, **Uzzah** put out his hand to keep the ark from falling to the ground (6), and “the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God” (7).

There are not many stories exactly like this in the Scripture, but in our study of **Leviticus 10**, we have come to one of them. Both stories involve a priest’s son doing something (probably more than one thing) wrong **near the ark of the covenant**, and for their error, God strikes them down, without mercy, **dead**.

I’m going to give a **basic overview** of that story in Leviticus, but there is so much to it that we need to take **several weeks** thinking about it. But then, I’ll **return to the birth narrative** of Luke (and a little in Matthew), given that this is the week many are celebrating the birth of Christ. I’m doing it, in part, because there are several interesting connections of his birth to Leviticus and I’m not aware of many who have talked about them.

One of those is this **ark-typology**. As you know, the ark of the covenant is inextricably tied to the tabernacle in the same way that a throne is tied to a king’s court or hall. And

I want to simply point out here, that Luke's Gospel begins, not with the birth of Jesus, but with the birth of *a priest*—John the Baptist. Throughout his entire nativity narrative, Luke has priestly things on his mind.

Another of those is this connection between **Uzzah** and what that story leads to in Luke's typology even as Uzzah is himself linked to the deaths of **Nadab and Abihu** in Leviticus 10. In this way, you may consider what we are doing this morning both **preparation** for a deeper study of Leviticus 10 and also **fitting reflections** for this time of year. If you are celebrating his birth, perhaps the remainder of this sermon will help you think a little better about what that should mean. If you are not, it should do the same thing, for what we are talking about in celebrating Christ's birth should be nothing less than the worship and adoration of God made flesh, which is what we do each time we gather together on the Lord's day.

This is exactly what we find **the Magi doing** in **Matthew 2:2**. “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to **worship him**.” But we also read something almost identical just a few verses later. “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and

worship him” (8). This second declaration of worship is, in my mind, a kind of parallel to what we find happening in Leviticus 10:1. For the one who said this lied and had no intention of worshiping the Lord. Meanwhile, what happens in Leviticus 10 is, according to Samuel as the sins of divination and idolatry (1Sa 15:22-23), the exact opposite of true worship.

Foolishness Near the Tabernacle

So what is going on in Leviticus 10? This is the story of the two oldest sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu. It tells us that “each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD” (Lev 10:1). Where the ESV reads, “unauthorized” fire, the KJV has the more famous “strange” fire.

In October 2013, John MacArthur brought together a host of speakers, including R. C. Sproul, Joni Eareckson Tada, and Conrad Mbewe, to equip Christians to understand and evaluate some of the more dangerous claims of the charismatic movement. He was launching his new book at the time, and so he named the conference the same as the title of that book: *Strange Fire*.

In both the conference and the book, MacArthur begins by taking us to Leviticus 10, which is the source of this pithy phrase.² As I get into this a little more, I'm going to bring up something else that harkens from the charismatic wing of the visible church, that is, the **things many people are singing about in worship** in this regard.

But before I do that, let's ask **what is this strange fire**? It only tells us explicitly that it was that "**which he had not commanded them**" (1). This is one of those places that the Reformed went to often in order to explain their **Regulative Principle of Worship**. The Regulative Principle states that **we may only do in the worship of God that which he has prescribed or commanded**. The fact that it wasn't anywhere forbidden, **which we will talk about another week**, isn't enough. As Heiser, speaking for almost all commentators says, **God hadn't specifically ordained this, it wasn't part of the procedure**.³ **The lesson** for understanding this comes in the next verse.

However, can we be more specific about what it means that **the LORD had not commanded it**? It is interesting that

² **John MacArthur**, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2013), Introduction. Or John MacArthur, "Strange Fire," (Oc 16, 2013). Transcript: <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/TM13-1/strange-fire-john-macarthur>; Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRqD89ZBWyg>.

³ **Michael Heiser**, Notes on Leviticus 10:1-7.

the Jews came up with 12 different answers for the problem.⁴ And those do not even include the likes of Philo and the Leviticus Rabba which, almost inexplicably believed their death was not the result of sin, but was a form of exaltation!⁵ They did not derive this from exegesis, but from philosophical speculation, and almost no one else has agreed with them.

At any rate, of those 12, the ones that have the best textual evidence are that **their fire was wrong**, they **penetrated too close** to the sanctuary (including **gazing greedily** upon the divine presence), and/or they were **drunk** and were not properly attired. Each of these has support from the text.

Strange fire. The most obvious one is that the fire was wrong. This is actually the most straightforward, because

⁴ Sometimes divided into two sets of six (moral and ceremonial), they 1) Presumed to decide the law in the presence of Moses; 2) They approached too close to the divine presence; 3) They brought an improper offering; 4) They brought strange fire from an oven; 5) They neglected to consult first with one another or with Moses; 6) They drank wine before approaching the altar; 7) They approached with unwashed hands and feet; 8) They lacked the prescribed number of garments (the robes); 9) They fathered no children; 10) They were arrogant thinking that no women were worthy of their status; 11) they longed to replace Moses and Aaron; 12) They gazed greedily upon the divine presence. See **Robert Kirschner**, “The Rabbinic and Philonic Exegesis of the Nadab and Abihu Incident (Lev. 10:1-6), *The Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXIII: 4 (April, 1983): 282 and n. 36. [375-93]. Also, **Louis Ginzberg**, “The Interrupted Joy” (and surrounding sections), in *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., ed. Henrietta Szold, and Paul Radin, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

⁵ See **James Kugel**, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 442-44. It is clear that they didn’t derive this from exegesis, but from philosophy. See also Kirshner, 385-91.

that's what the verse says. They offered "strange fire." But what does that even mean? Some want to go back to Exodus 30 where it says, "And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations. You shall not offer *unauthorized incense* on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it" (Ex 30:7-9).⁶ They focus in on "unauthorized incense." But where "unauthorized" is the same word, "incense" is clearly not. In fact, the Hebrew word for "incense" here is mentioned throughout the OT as being perfectly acceptable.⁷ Furthermore, when this same crime by these same two men is mentioned elsewhere, *fire is present*, but *incense isn't* (Lev 16:1 LXX; Num 3:4; 26:61). In other words, just like the verse says, it wasn't the incense that was the problem; it was the fire.

But why should that be important? *Fire is fire, right? Not at all.* This is where you have to see that their fire is

⁶ Luke 1:8-9 explains how the other priests besides the high priest (here, Aaron) could also offer incense. See also 1Chr 6:49.

⁷ John C. H. Laughlin, "The 'Strange Fire' of Nadab and Abihu," *JBL* 95:4 (Dec 1976): 560 [559-65].

actually **sandwiched** between the other verses, both of which mention fire. In both of those verses, the fire came directly from God out of the forbidden inner sanctum from whence the LORD dwelt between the cherubim. These verses actually form a chiasm with a deep and unsettling contrast:

A. Fire from before the LORD (9:24)

B. Strange fire (10:1)

A¹. Fire from before the LORD (10:2)

What is being communicated is that the fire Nadab and Abihu brought was fire of **their own kindling**, rather than the miraculous fire that came from the Presence of God himself. The source of their fire was not the altar upon which the fire from heaven came, but some other place that they decided to light their own fire. It was altar's fire, and its fire only—because it was the very fire of God, that would be acceptable to the LORD. This was the eternally pure flame and the reason the law had earlier commanded that they were never to let its embers die out (**Lev 6:9-13**).⁸

⁸ This also explains why Moses commands Aaron to take the fire from the altar in Lev 16:12-13 and Num 16:46. In fact, the latter story is about Korah's rebellion. Korah, like his cousins Nadab and Abihu, took fire from another source; but Aaron must not. **Laughlin**, 561.

Drinking and Clothing. A second thing they may have done wrong was get drunk. We will look at this **more another time**, but for now, it is enough to say that for some reason, once the ordeal had subsided, Moses commands the two youngest brothers, Eleazar and Ithamar, **not to drink wine or strong drink when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die (10:9)**. This is tied closely to another strange thing that Moses tells them, **“Do not let the hair of your heads hang loose, and do not tear your clothes, lest you die” (6)**. Hence, many suggest that one or both of these were added sins that the boys committed on top of strange fire, and that’s why it is added as the first of Moses’ commandments at the end of the disaster.

Before the LORD. A final problem may be that they approached too near to the LORD. This could be a problem for **a couple of different reasons**. Some think that it was only Aaron who was allowed to offer the incense, and so they went to a place they were forbidden to go. But, curiously, **the birth story of John the Baptist** tells us that it was precisely at the time when Zechariah his father the priest, was **“chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense” (Luke 1:9)** that an angel of the Lord appeared standing on the right side of the altar of incense (10). It

nowhere suggests that this was improper; and we know from other places (see **2Chr 13:10**) that the sons of Aaron in fact did offer incense.⁹ So the problem wasn't that they were not supposed to go in and offer incense.

But all of the verses that mention this event, including this one, say that they offered their fire “before the LORD.” Like the term “fire,” “before the LORD” is also found in the previous verse. There, it is clear that, “The phrase ‘before the Lord’ refers to the immediate presence in the Holy of Holies (or “Holy Place,” Lev. 6:30) inside the tent.”¹⁰ If it means it in the previous verse, it has to mean it here too. And so perhaps the young men dared to open the curtain to gaze upon the LORD. They might have thought this was fine for them, because God had given them this very privilege way back in Exodus 24, when they were invited to eat and drink with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai (**Ex 24:11**). And so, their presumption got the better of them as they went very near to where the fire from the previous verse had just erupted near the ark of the covenant.

⁹ Heiser takes the view that they were not allowed in there, only Aaron was. He does not account for these facts.

¹⁰ Heiser, Lev 9:23-24. A study on the differences in the Greek and Hebrew on “before the LORD” is Mark A. Awabdy, “Did Nadab and Abihu Draw Near before Yhwh? The Old Greek Among the Witnesses of Leviticus 16:1,” *CBQ* (2017): [580-92]. https://www.academia.edu/34951622/Did_Nadab_and_Abiyu_Draw_Near_before_Yhwh_The_Old_Greek_among_the_Witnesses_of_Leviticus_16_1.

As you can see, there is more to appearances than meets the eye. The limited information we have leads us to believe that this was **not some kind of accident**, nor that it was done out of ignorance to the commands. Rather, it was due to **negligence** caused by a kind of **letting down their guard** that because the Glory had just been seen by the all the people, that **God would loosen his regulations**, especially after seven full days of doing everything exactly as they were commanded. They would not heed God's commands and somehow they justified it in their own hearts that his commands no longer mattered. And they did this in the OT, immediately after all of the obedience that they had just offered for so many days in a row. That's a rather remarkable commentary on human nature and the ease in which we find ourselves justifying our sin against God.

These actions also remind me of **Uzzah**, for Uzzah was also the son of a priest. David got angry at the LORD for killing him, apparently like Aaron does when he finds out what has happened (implied in **Lev 10:3**). But **David should not have gotten angry**. According to Samuel both of these stories are so much worse than anyone can imagine. As he told Saul, **"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold,**

to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry” (1Sa 15:22-23). It seems it is the case that not following God’s commands is thus, by default, not only a rejecting of his commandments, but a rejecting of him as God and a turning to something or someone else to take his place. And that is frightening.

Uzzah and the other priests were neglecting their duty. They were carrying the ark of the covenant on an ox cart, emulating the very thing the Philistines did when they returned it way back in 1 Samuel 6:7. And why would the Philistines do that? Because that’s how they worshiped their Baals.¹¹ The priests of the LORD certainly should have known that God had Moses create very specific poles that were to go into the sides of the Ark to carry it by hand (Ex 25:14). The throne of God must not be carried by a bovine! Nadab and Abihu also seem to be emulating something of the pagan nations around them in the several actions we have seen that went into making this a detestable act in the LORD’s eyes.¹² And so, it was out of negligence of duty and

¹¹ See for example the commentary in [Ralph W. Klein](#), *1 Samuel*, vol. 10, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1983), 57.

¹² See the fascinating article [Richard Hess](#), “Leviticus 10:1: Strange Fire and an Odd Name,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 12 (2002): 187-98.

a careless attitude about syncretism (blending Yahweh's worship with the worship of pagans), all done in a celebration of the LORD, that both episodes end in utter disaster.

Peeking Into the Ark

In this light, I want to spend a moment having you think about a few songs that have been popular in some circles in recent years. Many years ago, I began to see [a pattern emerging](#) in the worship services I had to attend at college, then at seminary, and in some of the churches I went to. The pattern was that with increasing regularity, the people were singing worship songs about fire. When you do a google search on worship songs and fire, the results are nearly endless. Some of these songs are OK. I won't comment on those other than to say that they are songs that deliberately contextualize the fire with the work of Christ on the cross and the descent of the Holy Spirit to fill God's people. But others are [downright frightening](#). For example,

*All consuming fire
You're our hearts desire*

*Living flame of love
Come baptize us
Come baptize us (repeat 5x)
Let us fall more in love with you
We wanna know
How high, how deep, how wide is
Love, love love ...
I want more, I want more
I want more, I want more
I want more, I want more
I want more
I want more, won't You pour it out?¹³*

Or,

*Set me ablaze, set me ablaze
Till it's all that I know
Set me ablaze, set me ablaze
So I'll never grow cold (repeat)
Breathe, come and breathe
On the coals of my heart*

¹³ **Jesus Culture**, "All Consuming Fire," *Your Love Never Fails*, Cassie Campbell, David Brymer / Misty Edwards, Music Services, Inc., 2008.

*May Your fire start ...
Set me ablaze, set me ablaze
With a single obsession
Set me ablaze, set me ablaze
With an endless passion (repeat, etc. etc. etc.)¹⁴*

One song, called “Consuming Fire” has the lyrics:

*Consuming fire, consuming fire
Burning away, burning away¹⁵*

And that’s it. Those are the only lyrics of that song. They literally sing the first line 30 times and the second line 17 times during the song. On *Youtube*, the song lasts over two and a half minutes and the instrumental only lasts 15 seconds. It’s just the same four words repeated over and **over and over** and over, getting **louder and louder** and louder until. Someone like Philo who thought that these boys were not sinning but were being exalted might appreciate this kind of sentiment (I doubt it), but I swear you can hear Nadab and Abihu screaming in the background as the music

¹⁴ **Jesus Culture**, “Set Me Ablaze,” *Let It Echo*, Bryan Torwalt, Jacob Sooter, Katie Torwalt, Mia Fields, Essential Music Publishing, 2016.

¹⁵ **Todd Dulaney**, “Consuming Fire,” *To Africa With Love*, Entertainment One US LP, 2019.

reaches its crescendo, “Stop it. Don’t you know what you are asking for?” It is extraordinarily terrifying, kind of like the Nazis found out when they opened the lid of the Ark of the Covenant in Indiana Jones and melted like wax.

The sentiment behind many of these songs comes from the same dangers that MacArthur had in mind at his Strange Fire conference. The Holy Spirit is seen as a kind of force that gives us direct access into the Holy of Holies, quite apart from anything other than our own wishing and willing it (or singing it over and over and over like some chant to Molech or something). It is a great dishonoring of the All-Knowing Spirit of God to treat him so lightly, like he exists to do your bidding, like he’ll just come along and be **your own personal fire-buddy** that you can kindle and extinguish at will. And these songs are often accompanied by much more. MacArthur’s writes,

The Holy Spirit—the glorious third member of the Trinity—is no less God than the Father or the Son. Thus, to dishonor the Spirit is to dishonor God Himself. To abuse the Spirit’s name is to take God’s name in vain. To claim He is the one who empowers self-willed [**Nadab’s name = “Voluntary”**], whimsical, and unbiblical worship is to treat God [**Abihu = “He is my father”**] with contempt. To turn

the Spirit into a spectacle is to worship God in a way that He deplores. That's why the many irreverent antics and twisted doctrines brought into the church by the contemporary Charismatic Movement are equal to (or even worse than) the strange fire of Nadab and Abihu. They are an affront to the Holy Spirit, and therefore to God Himself—grounds for severe judgment (cf. Heb. 10:31).¹⁶

The songs that truly trouble me never say anything else but what I've shared with you. There's no Father, no Son, and really not even a recognizable Person called the Holy Spirit. Literally, a Baal worshiper could just as easily sing it as anyone else, though I bet even they would be too afraid to utter those words. When it's just me and the All-Consuming Fire, look out. This, in my opinion, is strange fire. It is hard to believe that any of these people writing these things have **ever even heard of** Nadab and Abihu. If they have, they obviously believe that because of the NT, God has loosened his regulations or even perhaps changed his very essence.

But **the story is there**, as is the story with Uzzah and many others. Offering strange fire to God is a profoundly dangerous thing, because at its heart, it is a combination of **narcissism** and **voyeurism** and deep **presumption** that

¹⁶ MacArthur, *Strange Fire*, xi.

brazenly seeks to peak behind the veil at the Glory, however I see fit. When the profane intrudes upon the holy, all hell must break loose, literally. For holiness simply can't be in the presence of the profane, the common, the ordinary, the familiar. It is by definition so "other" that it has to consume it.

There are similar songs out there that just replace Glory with fire (and in Scripture those two words are very closely linked). For example, listen to these brazen and jaw-dropping words:

*I see the cloud, I step in
I want to see Your glory like Moses did
Flashes of light, rolls of thunder
I'm not afraid
I'm not afraid
Show me Your glory, show me Your glory
Show me Your glory, show me Your glory*

*I'm awed by Your beauty, lost in Your eyes
I want to walk in Your presence like Jesus did
Your glory surrounds me and I'm overwhelmed*

I'm not afraid
*I'm not afraid*¹⁷

GULP! “Not even God himself can sink this ship!” Friend, you can’t see the Glory however you see fit. You can’t intrude into the Most Holy Place, open up the curtain even a little bit, and gaze upon the Glory. Asking to is asking for the death penalty. Rather, you may only see the Glory *how God sees fit*. In the last verse of Leviticus 9, the Glory showed himself because he was pleased with the faith of Moses and Aaron shown in their obedient handling of all things holy. The fire came and no one was hurt. In the next two verses, the narcissism and voyeurism and presumption of Aaron’s sons also brought fire on the coals of their hearts, and they were incinerated. As it says (and I have not yet quoted it for you), “And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD” (Lev 10:2).

The OT has these rules and regulations and stories like this added so that we can see just how holy and dangerous

¹⁷ Jesus Culture, “Show My Your Glory,” *Come Away (Live)*, Cindy Ratcliff, Israel Houghton, Capitol Christian Music Group, 2010.

Jesus Culture, “Set Me Ablaze,” *Let It Echo*, Bryan Torwalt, Jacob Sooter, Katie Torwalt, Mia Fields, Essential Music Publishing, 2016.

God actually is—that the Father, the Son, and God’s Holy Spirit actually are. **They are not to be trifled with.** They are like Aslan, “**good, but not safe.**” But in the NT, something has changed. Not God. But the way God comes to us, the way we see the Glory. And in the song I just quoted, it has utterly missed the point, for they pass right on by the true Glory, and want, like Philip (**John 14:8-10**), to see the Glory *apart* from Christ clothed in human flesh.

Ark Type

Just here, **let me return to the Uzzah story** and carry it out to its conclusion. After David’s anger subsides from the death of Uzzah, David becomes fearful and says, “**How can the ark of the LORD come to me?**” (**2Sa 6:9**). So, David took the ark **to the hill country of Judah** to the house of Obed-edom where it entered his house (**10**). There it “**remained for three months ... and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household**” (**11**). When David saw that God had blessed the man, he came and “**took it up**” to the city of David with rejoicing (**12**). He **sacrificed** an ox and a fattened animal (**13**). And David danced and leapt with joy with all his might (**14**).

Typology of Mary and the Ark

2 Samuel 6	Luke 1
The Ark traveled to the hill country of Judah to rest in the house of Obed-edom (1-11)	Mary traveled to the hill country of Judah (Judea) to the home of Elizabeth (39)
Dressed in a priestly ephod, King David approached the Ark and danced and leapt for joy (14)	John the Baptist (a priest) leapt for joy in his mother's womb at the voice of the Virgin Mary (Lk 1:41)
David asked, "How is it that the Ark of the LORD comes to me?" (9)	Elizabeth asked, "Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (43)
The Ark remained in the house of Obed-edom for 3 months (11)	Mary remained in the house of her cousin Elizabeth for 3 months (56)
The house of Obed-edom was blessed by the presence of the Ark (11)	The word "blessed" is used 3 times in Luke 1:39-45 concerning the Virgin Mary at Elizabeth's house.
The Ark returned to its sanctuary and later placed in Jerusalem where the presence and glory of God was revealed in the Temple (12; 1Kg 8:9-11)	Mary returned home from visiting Elizabeth and eventually came to Jerusalem where she presented God the Son in the Temple (56; 2:21-22)
David offers a sacrifice to the LORD (13)	Mary offers a sacrifice to the LORD (2:24) ¹⁸

So how does Luke use this story as a type? The answer is quite stunning, really. After the announcement that Mary will be with child, he tells us that **"In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah"** (39). This is where she entered the house of

¹⁸ Hahn writes that **"The Fathers of the early Church gave strong testimony to this identification of Mary with the ark of the covenant,"** but he provides no documentation. **Scott Hahn**, *Hail, Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God*, 1st ed. (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Image Books; Doubleday, 2001), 61. The modern thesis was proposed by **René Laurentin**, *Structure et théologie de Luc I-III* (Paris: Gabalda, 1957), and recently defended in **Jan M. Kozłowski**, "Mary as the Ark of the Covenant in the Scene of the Visitation (Luke 1:39-56) Reconsidered," *Warszawskie Studia Teologiczne* 31/1 (2018): 109–116, https://www.academia.edu/36729282/Mary_as_the_Ark_of_the_Covenant_in_the_Scene_of_the_Visitation_Luke_1_39-56_Reconsidered_in_Warszawskie_Studia_Teologiczne_31_1_2018_pp_109_116.

Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth (40). When Elizabeth saw her, she said, “Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (43). When Mary speaks, the Baby John leapt for joy in his mother’s womb (41). And there, Elizabeth exclaims a great blessing upon Mary (42). Mary stays three months in Elizabeth’s house (56), and afterwards, she takes her son, Jesus, up to Jerusalem (2:22), where she offers a sacrifice to the LORD (24).

These are the reasons that Ambrose makes the connection that he does, and many others have seen it as well. Mary is the new covenant Ark who carries the Law and Manna and the Budding Branch inside of her.

But this Law and Manna and Budding Branch do not remain hidden. Rather, the baby is born, and God is clothed in human flesh. The Glory of the Shekinah is now hidden. But he is not gone. He is cloaked in human frailty and weakness and common flesh—a son of Adam.

This is how we see the Glory in the new covenant. “With unveiled face, we behold the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ” (2Co 3:18; 4:6). “We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you, and his

glory will be seen upon you” (Isa 60:1). How? In Jesus Christ.

It is astonishing to me to compare the humble act of Mary in her contrition of offering sacrifices to the LORD for his gracious work in Christ, compared to the brazen (and seemingly ignorant) defiance of Nadab and Abihu. One is an act of true worship. The other is an act of rebellion and sorcery and idolatry. But people don't look on that way, do they? We get confused by the simplest acts of careless worship, thinking nothing about them, continuing on with our ideas of what true worship is.

In this light, let me return to the Magi, those men from the east, who like the priests of old came westward as they approached the True Sanctuary—the baby Jesus. They said, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him” (Matt 2:2). They offered him gifts and gave him great worship, though he was just an infant, because they believed that his fiery star has finally come, and the world would never be the same.

Or consider the worship of the shepherds, who, when the Glory of the Lord shone round about them, trembled with great fear (Luke 2:9). But the angel said, “Fear not, for

behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (10-11). “And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’” (14). And the shepherds came and saw the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, and they returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (20).

Compare this with a kind of worship I know you can see is evil. King Herod. This man, too, said, “Bring me word, that I too may come and worship him” (8). But it was a lie. He had no intention of worshiping God. Rather, he sought in his fiery wrath to kill the Son of God. A story I saw this week that asks, “Is this the greatest Christmas painting of all time?”¹⁹ The painting is called “Scene of the Massacre of the Innocents,” painted by Léon Cogniet in 1824.

It isn’t the greatest of paintings, but, as the author of the piece on it says, it must be one of the most haunting and

¹⁹ Michael Frost, “Is This The Greatest Christmas Painting of All Time?” *Mike Frost* (Dec 22, 2017), https://mikefrost.net/greatest-christmas-painting-time/?fbclid=IwAR3CvWr-S1Tv1-aTWnOi5xZrXQSenkcP0u5dhJbEZ-Ne_H4FFnuwz_uTpWI.

affecting. It isn't a picture of Mary and Christ, for they were not there that terrible day. Rather,

A terrified mother cowers in a darkened corner, muffling the cries of her small infant, while around her the chaos and horror of Herod's slaughter of the children of Bethlehem rages. Most painters of this scene turn it into a huge biblical spectacle, making it a revolting tableaux of death and mayhem. But Cogniet focuses our attention on one petrified woman, a mother who knows she is about to lose her child. She envelopes her doomed child, her bare feet revealing how vulnerable they are. There's no way to run. She is cornered.

Wisely, Cogniet doesn't show us the carnage. It is hinted at in the rushing figures in the background. Another mother is seen carrying her own children down the stairs to the left, running for their lives. But Cogniet shows a level of artistic restraint not seen in many depictions of this story. He forces everything to the background in order to draw our attention to the woman's terrified face.

That face!

Staring at... *us!*

It's as if we are one of Herod's agents of death, and we have found her. She glares at us in horror.



At the birth of Jesus, the heavenly host of angels had promised peace on earth and goodwill to all. But in Herod's slaughter of the infant boys of Bethlehem, we see not peace, but evil being unleashed. At Christmas we celebrate our belief that the king of the universe has come into the world, to wage peace and justice, to bring love and kindness to all. But we forget that the birth of Christ also released a malignant force, the unbridled power of empire, the jealous strength of a threatened monarch, meted out upon the most vulnerable of all people.

The birth of Jesus was a time of profound worship, but also a time of false worship, murderous treason cloaked in holy words. Jesus does something to men. He either draws them or he repels them. Both kinds of people are attracted to the Glory. The question is, when you think about those eventful days of his first coming to us in human flesh, will you think of that glory the way Nadab and Abihu did, taking for granted what is before you, presuming in negligence the seriousness that this is God in flesh? Or will you learn the lesson of coming to understand that God has provided a way for you to see his Glory without it ending in your own death.

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