

Ancient Insights Speak to Us Today

“And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8).

Having received the Torah at Mt Sinai, in Exodus 25 the Israelites receive from God the task of building the Tabernacle: a portable tent-like shrine which will signify the Lord’s presence among his people.

After listing the construction materials, the text describes each of the furnishings to be made. At the innermost section of the Tabernacle will rest the ark—the box or chest containing the stone tablets engraved with the Decalogue (‘Ten Commandments’). Thus the ark is linked in a special way with God’s covenant with Israel through the gift of Torah.

This text describes each of the furnishings:

“Exactly as I show you—the pattern of the Tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings—so shall you make it” (25:9).

“They shall make an ark...” (25:10).

“You shall make a cover of pure gold” (25:17).

“You shall make a table...” (25:23).

“You shall make a lampstand” (25:31).

“You shall then make cloths...” (26:7).

“You shall make the planks...” (26:15).

“You shall make bars...” (26:26).

“You shall make the altar...” (27:1).

As the construction details unfold, the recurring pattern “*You shall make...*” is clear. But there is one departure from the pattern which caught the attention of the rabbis:

“**They** shall make an ark” (25:10).¹

The exception occurs in relation to the ark itself.

Why the contrast: ‘they’ instead of ‘you’?

Observing that the ark is the first furnishing mentioned, in the Midrash (storytelling traditions of Judaism) we find this creative interpretative leap:

Just as the Torah preceded everything [at the Creation], so did God give precedence to the Ark over all other vessels in the construction of the Tabernacle; and just as light preceded all

other works of the Creation...so also did the work in connection with the Torah, which is called ‘light’—as it is written: ‘For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah a light’ (Prov. 6:23)—take precedence.²

But we have not yet answered our question: why ‘they’ instead of ‘you’? Again, hear the Midrash:

The Holy One...wished to stress that the command [to build the Tabernacle] applied to each and every Israelite alike. No one should have the excuse to say to one’s fellow Israelite: I contributed more to the ark. Therefore I study [Torah] more and have a greater stake in it than you! ... Whoever is part of the congregation of Jacob...they are just as important as the High Priest.³

Later commentary takes this further, pointing out that the implementation of the entirety of God’s teachings (Torah) requires collaborative effort.

“No single individual can perform all the precepts... But, taken as a whole, the Israelite people can keep the entire gamut of Jewish observances. For this reason the Torah states: ‘**they** shall make the ark.’⁴

Harnessing all related insights, Jewish commentators answer the question thus: By using the pronoun ‘they’ the Torah singles out the ark as having a special role, one enlisting all Israel in its making, accentuating the essential link between Torah, peoplehood and the indispensable gift and role of each person.

For Catholics living through the renewal of church life following the Second Vatican Council, this has meant viewing the church not as the sole domain of clergy but a calling to each member of the community to offer his/her unique gift as a member of the one body of Christ. We often ground such discussions in New Testament texts like 1 Corinthians 12. Yet, as we see above with the help of Jewish interpreters, there are further ancient biblical depths testifying to the communal vocation of God’s people and the

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unique role of each member of the community. In fact, the teaching of the Gospels and Epistles depends upon these more ancient insights as its foundation. Which is why the Hebrew Scriptures remain central to our Christian faith experience today.

To close with a quote from the Catechism of the Catholic Church: ‘The Old Testament is an indispensable part of Sacred Scripture. Its books are divinely inspired and retain a permanent value [cf. DV,14], for the Old Covenant has never been revoked.’ ([n.121](#))

1. Most English translations read ‘they.’ NAB: ‘you.’
2. See Exodus Rabbah
3. Midrash Tanhuma
4. Or Ha-Hayyim: a mystical commentary published 1742.

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (New York: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (New York, 1996); Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York, 1974); *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, accessed at the Vatican website.
Scripture: NJPS.

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