



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Deep wisdom

“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 in wording: ‘they’ instead of ‘you’?

Observing that the ark is the first furnishing mentioned, the storytelling (midrash) of the Jewish tradition makes 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, let’s turn to the midrash:

The Holy One Blessed be He 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 his fellow: 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 these insights, we might answer our question thus: By using the pronoun ‘they’ the Torah singles out the ark as having a special role, one which enlists all Israel in its making, highlighting the essential link between Torah, peoplehood and the indispensable gift and role of each person.

For Catholics, the renewal of church life over recent decades has meant viewing ‘church’ not as the sole domain of clergy but a calling for each member of the community to offer his/her unique gift as part of the one ‘body of Christ’. Biblically we usually ground such discussions in texts like 1 Corinthians 12. Yet, as we see above with the help of Jewish interpreters, there are further ancient biblical depths which can testify to the communal vocation of God’s people and the unique role of each member of the community of faith. In fact, the teaching of the Gospels and epistles only makes sense in the light of this more ancient wisdom. Which is why the Hebrew Scriptures remain central to our Christian faith experience today. •

1. Most English translations read ‘they’ NAB: ‘you.’

2. Exodus Rabbah

3. Midrash Tanhuma

4. Or Ha-Hayyim: a mystical commentary published Venice 1742.

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (NY: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996); Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY, 1974). Scripture: NJPS.