

SEPARATION

God called his people to an important mission: "You are my witnesses...that I am God" ([Isa. 43:12](#)). God placed the Israelites at the crossroads of the world so that through them, the world would know that Yahweh is the one true God. They were standing stones that testified to God and his plan to reclaim his world through his Son, Jesus. There was danger in the Israelites' mission, however. The very world they confronted with God's message had a seductive value system of its own. Israel's faithfulness to God's call would hinge on complete devotion to Yahweh. God knew how vulnerable his people were to the ungodly practices of the culture around them, so he supported them in their struggle. He intervened at crucial times to provide a sense of trust. He gave them a yearly calendar of feasts to remind them what it meant to be his people. The ark of the covenant was a constant reminder of his presence. He also gave them visual symbols and lessons to strengthen their devotion. For example, they sewed tassels on the corners of their robes to remind them of God's commands not to prostitute themselves "by going after the lusts of [their] own hearts and eyes" ([Num. 15:37-40](#)).

NAZARITES

Early in the history of Israel, God established the Nazarites as a unique category of people. They were totally devoted to his service ([Num. 6](#)). Nazarites took a vow of total separation from the community for a short time (or occasionally, for life). They became a living reminder to the Israelites of their call to be set apart from the pagan culture around them.

The creed of the Nazarite began with a vow taken by the individual, or by the parents before the birth of a child. The vow had four elements:

- First, a Nazarite was to abstain from wine, fermented drink, or any product of the grapevine ([Num. 6:3, 4](#)). Such a person would be odd in a culture where fresh water was scarce.
- Second, a Nazarite must allow his hair to grow and not use a razor ([Num. 6:5](#)). The appearance of this unshaven separatist would have created a stir wherever he went, even in a society in which beards were common.
- Third, the Nazarite must avoid dead bodies ([Num. 6:6, 7](#)). Some scholars believe this referred to human bodies. Others believe it referred to any dead body. In a meat-eating society, a vegetarian would be unusual.
- Finally, Nazarites completely consecrated and set apart their lives for the service of God ([Num. 6:8](#)). Their devotion to God encouraged the Israelites to be faithful, despite the seductive value system of its pagan neighbors.

A separate court for the Nazarites was contained within the Women's Court in the Jerusalem Temple. The Chamber of the Nazarites allowed them to continue their separation from the community during worship. It was here that the Nazarites could take their vows of separation, or terminate their vows and have their hair cut. This facility prevented contact with anyone who was ceremonially unclean. Both Samson ([Judg. 13:5](#)) and Samuel ([1 Sam. 1:27-28](#)) were Nazarites in Old Testament times. Samson tried to be God's instrument without separating himself from the Philistines. As a result, he failed and broke all of his vows. He killed a lion with his bare hands (thus touching a dead body). He attended a drinking party as the guest of honor. And he allowed Delilah to cut his hair. Each time, God's strength left him, leaving him weak. Only when Samson finally acknowledged God as the source of his strength was he able to defeat the Philistines, but he lost his life in the process ([Judg. 16:28-30](#)). John the Baptist may also have been a Nazarite ([Luke 1:15-17](#)). He subsisted on a diet of locusts and honey, wore a camel skin robe, had uncut hair, and avoided drinking wine (the usual beverage of the culture). These characteristics highlighted his total devotion to God and his message of the coming Messiah.

THE ARK OF GOD

God spoke to his people through their culture. He used their language and their customs. He described himself as a shepherd, for example, an occupation they knew well. When God commanded the Hebrews to build the tabernacle and temple, the builders followed cultural patterns that had been known for centuries. Moreover, long before God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, ancient peoples used tablets as symbols and summaries of covenants. The Ark of the Covenant, however, was unique in the history of the Near East.

THE DESIGN

The specific design for the ark is given in [Ex. 25:10-22](#). Its role is so important to God that he describes its construction before any other sacred object, even before the tabernacle itself. It was made of acacia wood, an extremely hard wood common to the Sinai Peninsula. The ark was 3 feet 9 inches long, 2 feet 3 inches wide, and 2 feet 3 inches high. It was plated with gold and had a gold rim around the top. It stood on four legs, and on each side were two gold rings so poles could be inserted for the Levites (the priestly tribe) to carry it. The cover called the mercy seat or atonement seat, was pure gold. On the top of the lid were two cherubim - probably sphinxes with their wings stretched over the cover.

WHAT THE ARK MEANT TO GOD'S PEOPLE

The ark became the focus of God's presence among his people. God would regularly appear in a cloud of glory on the mercy seat of the ark ([Ex. 25:22](#)). On the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the great holy day of the Bible, the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies chamber in front of the ark, and God would appear in the cloud over the cover ([Lev. 16:2](#)). A person who came before the ark was entering into God's presence.

The imagery of the ark expressed the people's longing to feel safe in God's protecting arms: "... under his wings you will find refuge" ([Ps. 91:4](#)). The ark provided evidence that the holy God of Abraham was a protecting, forgiving presence in the lives of his people.

The ark also gave assurance that the Lord was sovereign over all things. The people saw the box as God's footstool ([1 Chron. 28:2](#)). "The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake" ([Ps. 99:1](#)). What was there to fear when God was on his throne attended by the cherubim?

THE COVENANT

The ark's central purpose was to hold the Ten Commandments ([Ex. 25:16](#)), the summary of God's covenant with his people. The covenant itself comprised the whole Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Following Middle Eastern custom, God instructed Moses to make two summary documents of the covenant as his guarantee that his word would never fail. Normally, each of the covenanting parties took a summary copy and placed it in their most sacred place to read regularly as a reminder of the covenant. Apparently, God made the two summary copies (each containing all ten commandments) and gave them both to Moses, ordering him to place them in the ark.

Imagine Moses' reaction when he learned that the most sacred place for God and for Israel was the same the ark! As the ark was the presence of God to Israel, so Jesus became the presence of God during his ministry...but that's another story.