

Symbolism of the Ark

Universal Symbolism of the Receptacle
of Divine Immanence

by

Timothy Scott



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Preface

In diverse traditions we find an ensemble of symbols, motifs and narratives centring on the idea of a “container” or “receptacle” for the divine Presence. This idea is found in the symbolism of what we might loosely call “the Ark.” In the Semitic traditions this symbolism is most conspicuous in the biblical accounts of the Ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant. The aim of this book is to uncover the more or less universal significance of Ark symbolism through an exploration of its biblical expressions. The starting point for this inquiry is a set of immutable metaphysical and cosmological principles constituting the *philosophia perennis*, which informs the world’s integral mythological and religious traditions. I understand the Ark as the receptacle of Divine Immanence or, what amounts to the same thing, as the dwelling place of God. Immanence may be symbolised by a series of numerical hypostases, the most fundamental of which is the progression from the monad to the quaternary. In turn, the unfolding of the quaternary reveals the fullness of the decad, with the number ten adequately expressing the return of the monad to metaphysical zero. With the account of the Ark of Noah and, to a lesser extent, the Ark of the Covenant in the foreground, we survey the symbolic “progression” from zero to four. Thus the mythology of the Ark of Noah is considered as the movement from zero (the waters of the flood), through the principal monad (the Ark as “seed”), via the duad as both retraction (“two by two”) and emanation (the “twin peaked mountains”), to the ternary, both as a hierarchy of constituent elements (the “three decks” of the Ark) and as a creative “power” (the “three sons” of Noah), to the quaternary, which may be said to express Immanence in terms of cosmic stability (the Temple, the *Ka’bah*). The Noah myth is an expedient point of departure for a consideration of the Ark as a universal symbol with two fundamental expressions: the Ark as the divine “vehicle” (boat, ship, chariot) and the Ark as the “house of God.” These, however, are only the most obvious expressions of the symbolism under investigation and allusion is made to a variety of other related symbolic motifs (cup, trumpet, conch, heart, amongst others). In the final analysis we are engaged in an inquiry into universal metaphysical and cosmological principles.

The Ark is the receptacle of Divine Immanence. However, such a statement is too simple or even too obvious to bring into focus the vast body of symbolisms and the complex hermeneutics that explicate it. My aim is two-fold: to present an examination of the metaphysics related to the symbolism of the Ark, and to alert the reader to the broad scope of this symbolism. It might help to clarify the nature of this enterprise

by first saying what it is not. It is not a work of historical investigation, history of religion, history of ideas, nor speculative or systematic theology, in any limited sense of these words. Neither is this a work concerned with contemplative spirituality, although it is this rich tradition that yields some of the most valuable writings concerning the Ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant: one thinks of Hugh of St. Victor's *De arca Noe morali et de arca Noe mystica* and Richard of St. Victor's *Benjamin Major (The Mystical Ark)*, and the influence this last had on *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

This book might best be described as a work of comparative symbolic exegesis. I have attempted to present a study of the traditional symbolisms and metaphysics associated with the idea of the Ark envisaged as a universal principle. Admittedly this is not original in any modern sense of the word. It is not my intention to formulate some new idea, but simply to fathom the depths of the Ark symbol and its related symbolisms. Still, while this is not original it is nevertheless relatively unique among modern scholarly studies, which are more often than not concerned primarily with historical proofs of the Ark of Noah or the Ark of the Covenant.

This work is far from exhaustive; it seeks simply to suggest certain understandings and symbolic relationships that by their very nature are multivalent. When discussing principles I have tried to be direct and concise. Where I engage with examples, be they mythological, symbolical, or literary, I generally let the web of allusions, correspondences and analogies speak for itself. If we appear to wander from what might be thought of as Ark mythology, be this the Ark of the Flood or the Ark of the Covenant, this is due to my central premise: that the Ark symbolises the receptacle of Divine Immanence. Immanence includes every manifested and created thing from the Cosmos itself to the most insignificant speck of dust. God exists in all things and all things exist in God. Thus one might speak of any "thing" as the receptacle of Divine Immanence.

To fully understand the Ark as the receptacle of Immanence one must consider the relationship of Immanence and Transcendence. Thus one moves to a study of Reality in Its fullness, the content of which is infinite. The scope of such a study is limited only by one's intellectual horizon. Yet one is obliged to find a starting place. The notion of the symbolism of the Ark provides that starting place for this book. It is finally, as in fact all symbolism should be, a stepping-stone to an appreciation of the Divine.

Preface

*Noah's Ark is the symbol of our species,
A boat wandering the ocean.*

*A plant grows deep in the centre of that water.
It has no form and no location.*

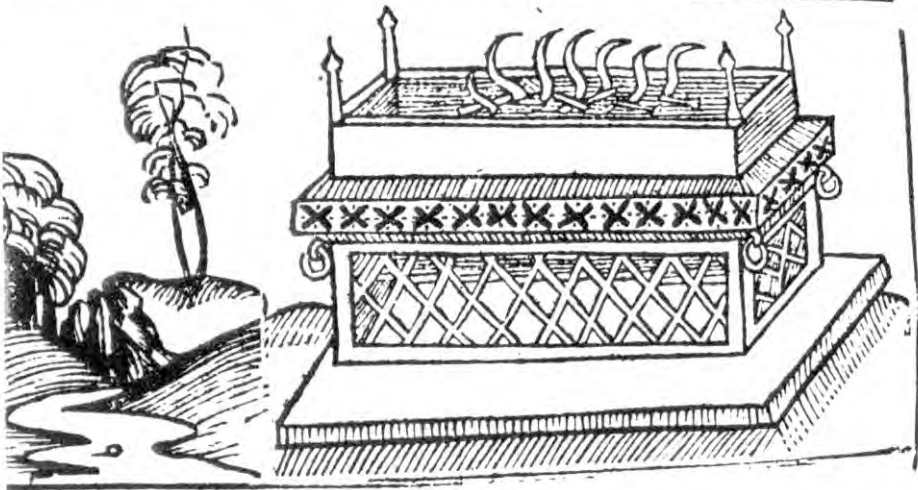
Jalāl al-Din Rūmī, *Kulliyat-e Shams*, 546, 561
(tr. C. Barks)



SYMBOLISM OF THE ARK



Altare holocausti scđm hebreos



Introduction

The Traditional Perspective

Tradition, in the rightful sense of the word, is the chain that joins civilisation to Revelation.

Lord Northbourne¹

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.

Proverbs 3:5

This book presents an exegesis of the traditional symbolism of the Ark. The term "traditional" here indicates a perspective most authoritatively elucidated in the writings of René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon.² I have attempted to engage Tradition as my mode of study; to regard the orthodox teachings of the world from a position of humility and respect, learning *from* them as well as *about* them.³ Kenneth Oldmeadow observes two complementary senses of the term "tradition": '*Tradition*: the primordial wisdom, or Truth, immutable and unformed; *tradition*: a formal embodiment of Truth under a particular mythological or religious guise which is transmitted through time; or the vehicle for the transmission of this formal embodiment; of the process of transmission itself.'⁴ To say Tradition is to say Revelation. As Whitall Perry says, 'Tradition is the continuity of Revelation: an uninterrupted transmission, through innumerable generations, of the spiritual and cosmological principles, sciences, and laws resulting from a revealed religion'.⁵ Tradition is an unbroken "chain" (*shelsheth* in Hebrew, *silsilah* in Arabic, *parampara* in Sanskrit).⁶

Tradition is as relevant today as it was in the past; it is not something to be studied as an oddity of history. On this point, Guénon remarks, 'Tradition, in its integrality, forms a perfect coherent whole, which however does not mean to say a systematic whole; and since all the points of view which it comprises can as well be considered simultaneously as in succession, there cannot be any real object in enquiring into the historical order in which they may have been developed and rendered explicit'.⁷ Nevertheless, as the light is brightest nearest its source it is somewhat inevitable that the majority of the teachings considered come from the early periods of human history. Here one must be careful to avoid the "twin pitfalls" of modern attitudes towards "ancient man" of either 'pretentious depreciation or that of an overly sentimental romanticism'.⁸

This book is principally concerned with the elucidation of the symbolism of the Ark through the "sacred sciences."⁹ As Seyyed Hossein Nasr says, "The traditional sciences of the cosmos make use of the language of symbolism. They claim to expound a science and not a sentimental or poetic image of the domain which is their concern, but a science which is expounded in the language of symbolism based on the analogy between various levels of existence."¹⁰

The symbolism of the Ark is informed by, and itself informs, the *cosmologia perennis* which "in one sense, is the application and, in another, the complement of the *sophia perennis*".¹¹ The *cosmologia perennis* is the science of cosmology. The *sophia perennis*, or universal *gnosis*, is essentially concerned with metaphysics. Both are embraced by the *religio perennis*, which is the language of the relationship between the Divine and the human.¹² A distinction must be drawn between the *religio perennis* and "religion" *per se*. Guénon defines "religion" in respect to its limitation to the "extensions of the human individuality".¹³ Frithjof Schuon observes that a religion is "not limited by what it includes but by what it excludes"; still, "since every religion is intrinsically a totality, this exclusion cannot impair the religion's deepest contents".¹⁴ A religion, observes Schuon, must satisfy all spiritual possibilities.¹⁵

The *sophia perennis* lies at the heart of each and every orthodox tradition. "Orthodoxy" provides the starting point in the study of the sacred. By no means should this term be taken as simply indicating the restricted "orthodoxy" of a certain Western religious conception. The "necessary and sufficient condition" of orthodoxy, as Guénon remarks, is the "concordance of a conception with the fundamental principle of the tradition".¹⁶ These "principles" are none other than the *sophia perennis*.

At the risk of labouring the point, this work is principally concerned with the symbol of the Ark within the context of the *sophia perennis*. This is to say that my aim is to expound the metaphysical principles that underlie and are expressed through the universal symbol of the Ark.¹⁷ We are here concerned not with information acquired by the discursive mind but with what Guénon calls "genuine knowledge":

Genuine knowledge, which alone concerns us, has little if anything at all to do with "profane" knowledge; the studies which go to make up the latter cannot be looked upon even as an indirect path of approach to "Sacred Science"; on the contrary, at times they even constitute an obstacle, by reason of the often irremediable mental deformation which is the commonest consequence of a certain kind of education.¹⁸

Similarly, Schuon:

The source of our knowledge of God is at one and the same time the Intellect and Revelation. In principle the Intellect knows everything because all possible knowledge is inscribed in its very substance, and it promises absolute certainty because its knowledge is a “being,” or a participation in being, and not merely a “seeing.”¹⁹

The Ark refers to a symbol or symbolism expressive of a metaphysical principle. This is not simply the Ark of Noah or the Ark of the Covenant, to limit ourselves to the Semitic traditions. The reader is asked to put aside preconceptions associated with this or that symbol of the Ark. Within the context of an examination of metaphysics, the symbolism of the Ark of Noah and the symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant are revealed as two aspects of the one principle. Moreover, these two symbolisms are not exclusive, each containing the other, with the significant difference being a matter of perspective and emphasis. When talking of metaphysics and traditional symbolism the question of perspective has none of the arbitrariness of certain modern relativist theories, but on the contrary is a matter of precision. Furthermore, the principle of the Ark can be recognised in various seemingly incongruous forms. These forms are of secondary interest in the context of this book; in the end we are concerned principally with the metaphysic of the Ark as expressed in the language of metaphysics. Having said this, it is necessary to devote a great part of this work to examining the universal mythologies and traditions related to the Ark, to venture into specific mythologies in order to decipher certain symbolisms and to explain the metaphysical principles that inform them.

In recognising the “universality” of these traditions another point must be made. Guénon refers to the movement from one language or tradition to another so as to make use of the best fitted form to explain the principle. While this represents the ideal scenario it nevertheless requires a proficiency in each of the “languages” which I do not claim. Hence, as discretion is the better part of valour, it may transpire that the best fitted form is overlooked in preference to the tradition with which I am most familiar. For this reason the mythological exposition of the Ark concentrates on the Western traditions—Judaic, Christian and Islamic. This is, however, only an expedient and we often turn to the Oriental traditions wherever they throw light on the issues at hand.