

THE A TO Z GUIDE TO
BIBLE
SIGNS and
SYMBOLS

Understanding Their Meaning and Significance

Neil Wilson and
Nancy Ryken Taylor



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The A to Z Guide to Bible Signs and Symbols is dedicated to all those who eagerly read the figurative language of God's Word, appreciate the literary scope of God's amazing written revelation, apply the truth presented in creative ways, and will immediately note with delight the many signs and symbols we didn't have room to include. Biblical signs and symbols can be described the same way the apostle John summarized the signs of Christ he chose for his Gospel:

Jesus performed many other miracles that his disciples saw. Those miracles are not written in this book. But these miracles have been written so that you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and so that you will have life by believing in him.

(John 20:30–31)

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Introduction

We want a sign!” The demand was issued in a threatening tone that left unspoken the “or else!” that was part of the tense moment. Jesus had just cleared the temple court in Jerusalem that had been turned into a kind of farmers’ market / money exchange under the permission of the religious people in charge. They were not happy with Jesus, and decided the best way to get rid of him and bring back the merchants was to challenge his right to intervene. They demanded his credentials. “Show us you have the right to order us around! Do a miracle! You claim to speak for God? Prove it!” John 2:13–22 gives us a glimpse of the significance of signs and symbols in the Bible. When his opponents demanded proof, Jesus said, “Tear down this temple, and I’ll rebuild it in three days” (John 2:19). His hearers thought he was referring to the impressive buildings surrounding them, but John explains Jesus was using the temple as a symbol: “But the temple Jesus spoke about was his own body. After he came back to life, his disciples remembered that he had said this. So they believed the Scripture and this statement that Jesus had made” (John 2:21–22).

Before Jesus is actually recorded as having performed any miracles, he faced a similar challenge: “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread!” (Matt. 4:3). Satan taunted him, “Prove you’re the Son of God. Show me a sign; whip up a miracle.” The exchange that follows between Satan and

Jesus during the wilderness temptation (Matt. 4:1–11) is one of the places in the Bible that emphasizes the significance of signs and symbols in understanding what God tells us in his Word.

Bible Signs and Symbols

Maybe your first question in opening this book is, what are signs and symbols and what is the difference between them? Good question. Signs point or draw attention; symbols represent. Signs are clues; symbols are pictures that denote an object, purpose, or concept. Public bathrooms around the world display recognizable symbols (usually on the door) that indicate male and female facilities. In some cases, signs and symbols work together. Walk through an airport in a foreign place and you will see signs displaying a plate and utensils, indicating a place to eat in the direction of the arrow. Signs are like calling cards, passports, and deeds—not necessarily related directly to an object, they confirm or prove a claim. The signs that you own a car or home are the keys in your hand and the title in your possession with your signature (itself a sign) on the correct line. Signs don’t have to be documents; they can be unconnected events or circumstances whose occurrence indicates the truth of a different claim.

In the English Bible, the word *sign* translates the Greek word *semeion*, which is used in a passage like Luke 2:12, “This is how you will recognize him” (or as the King James translation

puts it, “And this shall be a sign”): “You will find an infant wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.” Literally, the angel said, “And this will be to you the sign that what I just said is true about the Savior, who is Christ the Lord, born to you this day in the city of David.” Signs serve as X that marks the spot. When we find or see a sign, we expect to find what we were told we would find.

The word *symbol* is used rarely in any translation of the Bible. *GOD’S WORD*, for example, uses the term twice (Ps. 74:4; Isa. 8:18). But the term is often used by students of the Bible to describe the teaching style of the Scriptures. Biblical writers often substituted a trait or quality in one familiar object to highlight a similar or parallel trait they were explaining. Symbols often allowed Bible people to talk about one thing while actually describing something else.

The word *sign*, in comparison, is used many times throughout the Bible. The Greek word *semeion* is often translated *miracle* because that usually is the primary idea. To those eager to confront Jesus, a miracle on command might demonstrate that he had some special powers from God, but it would also demonstrate he was vulnerable to manipulation. If he’d felt it necessary to “prove” himself, he would actually be revealing a lack of confidence in his own identity. Jesus didn’t fall for Satan’s challenges in the wilderness—“If you are the Son of God” (Matt. 4:3, 6)—because in “proving” who he was he would be yielding control to Satan. The sign-miracles Jesus performed were in response to genuine need rather than a need on his part to demonstrate to doubters who he was. Even the miracle of walking on the water wasn’t done by Jesus “on command” or because the disciples expected/demanded it, but to give them an indelible lesson.

Perhaps you are one of those people who is already thoroughly confused about Bible signs and symbols and is just looking for an introduction to shed some light on the strange, unusual, and surprising aspects of this book we often refer to as the Word of God. One of the

surprises may be that when you understand the way signs and symbols are used, you will figure out many of them for yourself. Whether it was *signs*, *symbols*, or *Bible* that caught your attention, we trust that *The A to Z Guide to Bible Signs and Symbols* will deliver some helpful insights and answers as you explore the Scriptures on your own.

Rules for Signs and Symbols

The Bible itself is self-conscious about its symbolic nature. One of the most important interpretive questions to ask when studying an apparent Bible sign or symbol is, does this imagery or idea appear elsewhere in Scripture? The Bible often explains itself quite clearly and discourages our efforts to find symbolism or signs where there are none. See, for example, Luke 11:29–32, where Jesus addresses the lack of signs because people are evil and won’t even benefit from the sign God *does* offer. But God’s Word has plenty of interesting symbols for us to understand.

By way of caution, here are several easy errors that affect our quest and understanding of signs and symbols in Scripture:

- *Background blindness.* Sometimes we read into the Bible the current meanings of words that were not intended by the original writer. One of the reasons we study the culture and history that surrounds the Bible is to be aware of how this “background” informs the words and pictures we find in Scripture. If our early reading of the Bible takes us to a verse like 1 Corinthians 5:7 (“Remove the old yeast of sin so that you may be a new batch of dough, since you don’t actually have the yeast of sin. Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed”), our understanding of Paul’s message will depend on our awareness of Old Testament Passover history and traditions, the place of Passover in Jesus’ ministry, and the role of yeast in the

Passover preparations. The background isn't stated in the verse but it is scattered throughout Scripture.

Taking the time to understand the cultural context of events and statements in Scripture often deepens their meaning or sharpens their impact on our lives. For example, it could be said that the climax of Jesus' teaching occurred during that last week of his ministry when he was asked an honest question about the most significant aspect of life. Although Matthew (22:34–40) doesn't really distinguish the following interaction from the rest of the hostile questioning Jesus faced, Mark makes the point that one of the listening scribes "saw how well Jesus answered" (Mark 12:28), so he asked a genuine question: "Which commandment is the most important of them all?" (v. 28). Jesus answered directly with what everyone listening to him that day immediately recognized as the Shema, the summary commandment of Deuteronomy 6:4–5. The scribe enthusiastically agreed with Jesus (vv. 32–33). After all, he had probably uttered that commandment several times that day already! Jesus wasn't telling him something his listeners didn't already know. He quoted Old Testament words that were as familiar to them as their own names. He wasn't creating a new teaching; he was holding his audience deeply accountable to what God had already said. Yet note that despite the scribe's wholehearted agreement with Jesus on what was the most important commandment of all, Jesus gently told him, "You're not too far from the kingdom of God" (v. 34). Conversations about this passage in a secular, pluralistic society like ours can easily miss the impact Jesus' words made in a rampantly religious society. His last comment informed his questioner and the rest of the audience that even knowing what was the most important expectation

from God, and perhaps repeating it often in prayer, at best left someone "not too far from the kingdom of God."

- *Literal insensitivity.* Here we find two sides to the issue. The first one is presented in a question like, "Do you believe the Bible is literally true?" This is usually a trick question designed to attack the reliability, truth, and inerrancy of Scripture. If a believer says yes, he or she is likely to hear, "So when Jesus calls Herod a fox, he meant that the king had four paws and a tail? 'Cause that would be the literal meaning of his statement, right?" But if the believer says no, the likely accusation is, "So, you don't really believe the Bible is true?" The whole idea that we can identify and describe Bible signs and symbols depends on our understanding that the Bible can communicate when truth is being presented figuratively and when it is being presented literally. And sometimes there is a place for both figurative and literal interpretation, for as we have already pointed out, understanding what the Bible says is the first step in seeking to understand what it means.

Another side of the "literal" question arises when both parties are claiming to take the Bible seriously, but one is being *too* literal. In a recent article ("Seven Deadly Sins of Bible Study"), author Jack Kuhatschek describes one such encounter: "Several years ago the cult expert Walter Martin [author of the outstanding book *Kingdom of the Cults*] was giving a lecture on Mormonism. A few Mormons heard about the lecture and decided to attend. About halfway through the meeting, one of them stood up and began arguing that God the Father has a physical body like ours. He 'proved' his point by quoting passages that refer to God's 'right arm,' 'hand,' 'eyes,' and so on.

"Martin told the person to read aloud Psalm 17:8, 'Hide me in the shadow of your wings,' and asked whether that

meant God also has feathers and wings. ‘But that’s simply a figure of speech,’ protested the Mormon. ‘Exactly!’ replied Martin.”

Kuhatschek goes on to comment, “In order to avoid a wooden kind of literalism, we need to realize that the biblical authors communicated in a variety of ways—through metaphors, similes, and symbols—and through a variety of literary genres, such as history, proverbs, parables, letters, poems, and prophecy. We must identify the type of language and literature an author is using in order to interpret his meaning correctly. If we assume, for example, that an author is speaking literally when he is speaking metaphorically (the mistake made by the Mormon), we end up with nonsense.”

- *Anchorless texting.* Another mistake is to take a word or phrase that serves in a symbolic way in one part of Scripture and assume that it serves the same way elsewhere, when it may not. Look at the first few chapters of the Gospel of John, where the word *water* is used in at least four very different ways: plain water; baptismal water; physical birth; and living, spiritual water. If we try to force one meaning on *water* in every circumstance, without taking the context into account, we will end up confused. (See the entry for *water* for more on this.)
- *Linguistic handicap.* If we are reading an older translation of the Bible, such as the King James Version, the grandeur and richness of the language should not lull us into unawareness that words from the Elizabethan English culture of 1611 may mean something different today. Consider, for example, something as simple as the word *want* as used in the familiar phrase, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1 KJV). As used today, the verb means “to desire,” but as used in

the KJV, the word means “lack” or “need.” Understanding that term affects our expectations from God’s role as Shepherd (does he promise to give me what I want or what I need?) and it significantly colors all the figurative language derived from a sheep’s life and relationship with its shepherd that fills this psalm.

As a reflection of the character of God, the Bible is rich in imagery, style, and variety in communication. God’s authorship ensures a single guiding hand and mind while God’s use of human writers spread over one and a half millennia ensures a scope unequaled in literature.

The Bible demands much from language and gives a lot back. It has been translated into more languages than any other book, and there is intense interest in making it available in every active language on the face of the earth. In a sense, the story of the division of human speech that is recorded in Genesis won’t come full circle until every person has the opportunity to read God’s Word in their mother tongue. The Bible is a translatable book, demonstrating a unique character that seems to fit a language in the same way God fits into a life. Living languages that express the human experience and adapt to reflect both its constants and changes find their greatest purpose in conveying God’s Word.

Bible Signs and Symbols Today

The wide impact of the Bible on thought and language can be partly seen in the ongoing use of signs and symbols in common language. We can even see this illustrated in the book itself, since its various parts were written over a millennium and a half. The scope of Scripture allows for not only the introduction of signs and symbols, but also a development in their use as succeeding generations discovered that an effective picture of truth can expand to reflect a greater understanding of that truth. Consider, for example, a word such as *light*, introduced in Genesis 1:3. Reading the first chapter in the

Bible, we discover that light was present *before* those objects we usually think of as sources of light. God said “Let there be light” in verse 3 and didn’t say “Let there be lights” until verse 14. From its introduction on the first page of Scripture to its appearance in the last chapter of Revelation (22:5), the word *light* develops a portfolio of meaning worth exploring—as do all the entries in the sampling included in *The A to Z Guide to Bible Signs and Symbols*.

Those familiar with Scripture will probably discover one or two of the favorite signs and symbols have been overlooked or not given enough attention. Any claim to provide much more than an introductory exposure to the range and significance of biblical signs and symbols would fly in the face of our experience with the Bible, which demonstrates on its own a remarkable capacity for speaking with fresh symbolic language into contemporary life. So, for example, people introduced today to the original languages of the Bible (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) are somewhat surprised to discover that text messaging originated long before modern times. The written form of the Hebrew language includes no vowels, making the entire Old Testament a collection of God’s text messages to us!

So enjoy *The A to Z Guide to Bible Signs and Symbols* with your Bible open. The specific sign and symbol words for this volume are derived from the *GOD’S WORD* translation of the Bible, so if you are using a different translation, you may find variation in English words on occasion. These will generally be synonyms, not completely different terms.

May this book expand your palate for the bread of life and living water. May it sharpen your awareness of the lamp God has provided for your feet and the light it can be for your path. And may you discover that though God’s Word has been written, published, and closed, it remains a living and powerful tool that can transform your life today and prepare you for eternal living with the Author of the Book.

Bible Signs and Symbols in Prophecy

The Bible speaks into life at any and every moment in history. Because it is timelessly true, a special connection exists between Scripture and the idea of prophecy. Every writer God used in publishing his Word was writing for his own day as well as for the future—in ways the writers could only dimly understand, if at all. Peter notes this in his first letter:

The prophets carefully researched and investigated this salvation. Long ago they spoke about God’s kindness that would come to you. So they tried to find out what time or situation the Spirit of Christ kept referring to whenever he predicted Christ’s sufferings and the glory that would follow. God revealed to the prophets that the things they had spoken were not for their own benefit but for yours. What the prophets had spoken, the Holy Spirit, who was sent from heaven, has now made known to you by those who spread the Good News among you. These are things that even the angels want to look into. (1 Pet. 1:10–12)

So, in the sense that it is timeless, all Scripture is prophetic. When 2 Timothy 3:16–17 makes the claim for the divine inspiration of the Bible, it also addresses the usefulness or profitability of Scripture for “teaching, pointing out errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God’s approval.” This usefulness is declared without time constraints. What was true then is true now. The Bible continues to be *useful* for all these purposes.

Many of the signs and symbols in Scripture have been employed fully or partially to convey prophecy. But a word used even extensively in a prophecy section doesn’t cease to have its regular meaning elsewhere. Paul, for example, asked Timothy to bring certain scrolls to Rome (2 Tim. 4:13), and in his vision in Revelation John saw symbolic scrolls that will be unsealed at the end of the age. Paul’s scrolls were made

of velum and intended to be unrolled and read; John's symbolized huge records of history to be unfurled in a vision. Because of the connection between signs, symbols, and prophecy, the articles in *The A to Z Guide to Bible Signs and Symbols* will attempt to give appropriate attention to that aspect of biblical language usage. The usage often comes in layers, so we find in the pages of Scripture real horses, symbolic horses like the ones God mentioned to Jeremiah ("If you have raced against others on foot, and they have tired you out, how can you compete with horses?" [Jer. 12:5a]), and prophetic horses like the ones seen by John in Revelation.

Our understanding and appreciation of symbolic and prophetic language will always rely on our understanding of common, daily language. The first builds on the second. If we have no concept of birth and its wonder and limitations, how can we understand the "second birth" or "being born from above" (John 3:3)? If we don't grasp the reality of heaven and earth as a creation of Almighty God, how can we engage with the pictures of the new heaven and the new earth?

God gave us his book to reveal himself. It was meant for us to understand, though some parts are difficult to understand. It's always better to admit we don't understand some part of Scripture than to simply make something up out of thin air. This is particularly true of prophetic passages. G. K. Chesterton offered one of the

best descriptions of what occurs when people insist on being able to interpret all of Revelation: "And though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators" (*Orthodoxy* [Wheaton: Shaw, 1994], 13). *So we approach the signs and symbols in the Bible with humble interest and reasonable caution.*

Bible signs and symbols enrich our lives by showing us how God uses what's common to prepare us for what has depth and meaning. The prophetic side of biblical signs and symbols reminds us that God is working out his plan everywhere, in everything, at all times. The value of signs, symbols, and prophecy is partly in their capacity to provoke our curiosity, but they come to their full significance when we remember that they all point to God and our never-ending need to understand and respond to him more fully.

Peruse and use *The A to Z Guide to Bible Signs and Symbols*, remembering that these brief studies of biblical terms and ideas are meant to accomplish more than the increase of knowledge. They invite us into deeper intimacy with the Author of these ideas. As you discover more about God and his unique Book, may you pass through fearful moments when you realize that the God who authored the Bible knows you in exquisite detail, and then move on to the ever-expanding delights of knowing God as he allows us to know him.

Altar

In the Old Testament, the object erected time and time again to communicate the presence and power of God was an altar. The altar could be a single rock or a loosely organized arrangement of large stones, so people were never far from an altar or could build one in a few moments. Nothing was more prominent as a biblical image for worship and allegiance to God than the altar. It is no exaggeration to say that the most visible sign of one's devotion to the true God in the worship of the old covenant was the building of altars or traveling to them for acts of sacrifice or offering.

Usually constructed with stones that had not been fashioned with tools, the altar was a raised platform on which a fire was kindled. Its form suggested a table or brazier. Altars would be placed beneath the open sky where their smoke could ascend to the heavens. Later, when the altars were constructed for tabernacle worship in the wilderness and for the temple in Jerusalem, they were cast or covered in metal, and the four corners rose, forming points called *horns*.

Altars in the Old Testament

Noah was the first man in the Bible to build an altar, and he did so as an expression of thanksgiving for God's protection during the flood. Abraham, the next altar builder, constructed several as he wandered through the desert. His altar at Shechem was a symbol of his entrance into the Promised Land (Gen. 12:7). He also sacrificed animals and called on the name of the Lord at altars he had built at Bethel, Ai, and Hebron (Gen. 12:8; 13:18). Isaac and Jacob followed his example and built altars in connection with the renewal and expansion of God's covenant.

The tabernacle had two prominent altars: the altar of burnt offering (Exod. 27:1–8) and

the altar of incense (Exod. 30:1–10). The altar of burnt offering was located near the front entrance of the tabernacle and was used for the daily burnt offering and meal offering. It symbolized the need for daily cleansing from sin and the necessity of having sin atoned for before one could enter the presence of God. The altar of incense was in front of the veil that separated the most holy place from the rest of the tabernacle. Priests burned incense here, offering up an aroma that was symbolic of prayer and praise rising up to God. In later years the temple had these same basic altars, albeit in a more permanent form.

Altars were sometimes built in Bible times as a commemoration of an event. In Joshua 22 Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh built an altar east of the Jordan River with no intention to use it for sacrifices but as a symbol of solidarity with the rest of Israel.

From Daily Sacrifice to Once-for-All Atonement

An altar was a place of slaughter. In fact, the Hebrew word for *altar* comes from the word that is often translated “slaughter.” The altar would be stained with blood, for its central purpose was blood sacrifice. Helpless live animals came squealing to the altar, and their necks were placed on the unhewn stones and sliced open. The blood would flow as the animal was placed on the open flame. The stench was strong, the sight grotesque, and the sounds horrifying. The fire—a symbol of God's presence—would consume the animal. As the sacrifice was made on the altar, God appeared to his people and a holy interchange occurred.

The blood from the animal was either sprinkled against the altar or smeared on its horns, and it was the blood that atoned for the sins of



Jacob knelt before an altar to commemorate the expansion of the covenant.

the people (Heb. 9:22). God declared, “Blood contains life. I have given this blood to you to make peace with me on the altar. Blood is needed to make peace with me” (Lev. 17:11). The sacrifice symbolized our need for a savior. The sacrificial animal stands in our place; the animal dies instead of us.

When we reach the New Testament, the blood running down the sides of the altar reminds us of God’s atoning work. Where animal sacrifices permeate the Old Testament, the New Testament is filled with references to Jesus as the ultimate atoning sacrifice. Jesus died on the cross as the Lamb of God, shedding his blood for the sins of humankind. And throughout the Christian era continuing to the present day, when the church gathers at the communion table to celebrate the Eucharist, Christians drink from a cup that symbolizes the blood of Jesus. In the end, the altar reminds us of Jesus’ sacrifice and God’s provision. Because of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, we no longer use altars in worship. Sometimes the front of a church is called an altar, but the symbol that has replaced the altar in the worship of Jesus is the table where we meet Christ and share in communion.

Key Verse

The priests slaughtered the goats and made their blood an offering for sin at the altar to make peace with the LORD for Israel. (2 Chron. 29:24)

In addition to the altars to the one true God, throughout the Old Testament we see references to altars built to false gods. Because these were both a practical element involved in the worship of these gods and a symbolic representation of allegiance to them, pagan altars had to be torn down as the Israelites conquered the Promised Land (Deut. 12:2–3). Whether or not a king adhered to this directive determined how he would be remembered—as a follower of God or a follower of false gods. Indeed, we are all remembered for our worship, whether or not we build altars in our hearts to God and continually tear down altars to the false idols of self, prestige, or false religion.

Ark

The term *ark* in Scripture has two main meanings: one is a large boat built by Noah, and the other is the ark of the covenant that was housed in the tabernacle and later in the temple. Both of these images encapsulate important spiritual truths related to salvation.

Noah's Ark

The ark (also translated “boat” or “ship”) in Genesis 6–8 was, quite literally, a huge undertaking. With no modern tools, Noah built a three-story boat that was 450 feet long and 75 feet wide. The gopher wood from which it was constructed was covered with waterproof pitch. The final touches included a roof, a window, and internal walls to make rooms. This floating home became a refuge that guaranteed the continuance of the human race and the animal

and showed them mercy (Gen. 8:1; 1 Pet. 1:3). The rebirth aspect of salvation is symbolized by the ark as well: after the flood, Noah and his sons rebirthed the human race as a sort of second Adam (Gen. 9:2–3). God's charge for them to be fruitful and multiply echoes the original creation mandate in Genesis 1. The Hebrew word translated as “ark” in the story of Noah is used in one other place in Scripture—the story of Moses being placed in a basket or “ark” on the Nile River when his life was in danger from Pharaoh's death edict against Hebrew boys. Here also God's chosen man was saved from a watery death and carried safely in the ark through his providential care. The scope of the story could not be more different—a tiny basket for one baby versus a giant ark for an entire family and a pair of every animal on earth—but the symbol of salvation and preservation is the same.

The presence of an ark in both of these stories is no coincidence. Noah and Moses have many similarities in terms of their significance to Israel. Each man stood at a turning point in Israel's history and saved the nation from annihilation. They both fulfilled the covenant promise that God would protect Israel. In both of their stories, the ark served as a physical instrument of preservation and a symbol of salvation—a guarantee of the continuance of the nation of Israel at a time when all hope seemed to be lost. But it was also a symbol of the possibility of salvation, God's intent to save sinful humankind even as he executes judgment against civilizations that are opposed to him.

In the New Testament, Peter further emphasizes the ark as a symbol of salvation when he draws a parallel between the flood of Noah's day and the waters of baptism: “They are like those who disobeyed long ago in the days of Noah when God waited patiently while Noah



Noah's ark came to rest on Mount Ararat.

kingdom. It separated the chosen survivors from those who perished in the flood.

The ark was a symbol of salvation and preservation. In contrast to those who suffered under God's judgment and were destroyed in the flood, those in the ark were saved from death and punishment. God “remembered” these chosen ones



built the ship. In this ship a few people—eight in all—were saved by water. Baptism, which is like that water, now saves you” (1 Pet. 3:20–21a). Believers are saved from death and given new life just like Noah and his family, and later Moses, were saved from death and birthed a new era in Israel’s history. But they had to go through the water. The water that signified judgment in Noah’s day has been transformed through the work of Jesus into the waters of death, cleansing, and resurrection as believers are reconciled to God and declared righteous before him. In all these cases God in his mercy reaches down and rescues believers from death and they are reborn (John 3:5). The ark is a sign of the salvation from death and rebirth to new life that is the gospel.

The Ark of the Covenant

The ark of the covenant was the most sacred possession of the Israelites, built at the same time as the tabernacle. It was a box about 45 by 27 by 27 inches in size, made of acacia wood overlaid with gold. On each corner was a gold ring, and through these rings poles were placed for carrying. Inside the ark of the covenant were the stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments, a golden pot of manna, and Aaron’s rod. These were all reminders of God’s covenant with Israel and his faithfulness to them.

The most important feature of the ark of the covenant was the mercy seat, which was a piece of gold that sat on top of the ark, resting between two gold statues of cherubim that faced each other with outstretched wings. Each

year on the Day of Atonement, the blood of a sacrificial animal was smeared on the “throne of mercy” as a sign of God’s mercy to forgive sin. This “throne of mercy” was the symbolic throne of God, indicating that he lived among his people (Lev. 16:2; Num. 7:89).

The sacred ark of the covenant was a symbol of God’s mercy—mercy to live among his people and mercy to forgive their sin. Each time they moved camp during the wilderness wanderings, God led them with the tangible symbol of the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant is a visible sign of the truth that God mercifully comes to his people, forgiving and guiding them in their daily life on earth, and leading them safely to the Promised Land.

Key Verse

Faith led Noah to listen when God warned him about the things in the future that he could not see. He obeyed God and built a ship to save his family. Through faith Noah condemned the world and received God’s approval that comes through faith. (Heb. 11:7)

Dutchman Johan Huibers has built a full-scale replica of Noah’s ark that can be toured by up to three thousand visitors per day. He has filled it with a mix of life-size reproductions and some live animals so guests can get a feel for what it was like to live on the ark. The boat is moored in the city of Dordrecht, just south of Rotterdam.

Arm

Aside from its physical definition, *arm* is used in Scripture as a symbol of power in action—either divine or human. The context will of course determine whether the word is meant literally or figuratively, and whether its figurative sense is power used for good or for evil.

God’s Mighty Arm

The most common function in Scripture for the symbol of a powerful arm is to describe the mighty actions and purposes of God. The biblical writers often referred to his “mighty arm”: “Your arm is mighty. Your hand is strong. Your right hand is lifted high” (Ps. 89:13). The idea behind this symbolic picture is so obvious that modern translations often convey the meaning directly. For example, *GOD’S WORD* translates Psalm 77:15 as, “With your might [literally *arm*] you have defended your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.”

One of the frequent contexts for the use of *arm* in referring to God also communicates his willingness to intervene powerfully in the affairs of this world. He instructed Moses, “Tell the Israelites, ‘I am the LORD. I will bring you out from under the oppression of the Egyptians, and I will free you from slavery. I will rescue you with my powerful arm and with mighty acts of judgment’” (Exod. 6:6). The word *powerful* translates a Hebrew expression for “outstretched or reaching action” on God’s part. God is not just

powerful at a distance; he is fully able to judge, defend, and act on behalf of those he wants to protect or correct. This is the idea in Deuteronomy 3:34; 5:15; 1 Kings 8:24; 2 Kings 17:36; Psalm 136:12; and Jeremiah 21:5.

God’s Compassionate Arms

Isaiah refers to God’s arm more often than any other biblical book (fourteen times). Among these is a prophetic picture of God’s compassionate care for his people, even after he has had to correct them severely: “Like a shepherd he takes care of his flock. He gathers the lambs in his arms. He carries them in his arms. He gently helps the sheep and their lambs” (Isa. 40:11). Fitting in with this meaning of the symbol, we think of his “arms” supporting us in times of



An arm is a symbol of strength.



God’s power is portrayed as an arm raised in victory.



need and sorrow. Scriptures such as Deuteronomy 33:27 are poignant reminders of God's tender care: "The eternal God is your shelter, and his everlasting arms support you." Many hymns, such as "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," reflect that sentiment.

The comforting aspects of God's enveloping arms can be seen most clearly when God puts on human flesh. In the New Testament we see God with flesh-and-blood arms, and he doesn't hesitate to use them. "Jesus put his arms around the children and blessed them by placing his hands on them" (Mark 10:16). Both Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:51) and John (John 12:38) saw in Jesus the revelation of God's power/might that was anticipated in Isaiah 53:1: "Who has believed our message? To whom has the LORD's power [arm] been revealed?" The mode of Jesus' death leaves us with a powerful picture of how far God went to show us his love. Romans 5:8 declares, "Christ died for us while we were still sinners. This demonstrates God's love for us." God was willing to open his arms in love to us, even if that meant being nailed to a cross.

The Arm of Judgment

While God's powerful arm is usually portrayed as working to redeem and protect his people, it is occasionally meant as a symbol of judgment. When his people committed idolatry, God declared that he would allow the Babylonians to conquer them, saying, "I will fight you in anger, fury, and rage with my powerful hand and my mighty arm" (Jer. 21:5). The same powerful arm that redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 4:34) now sided with Babylon to bring about her defeat.

Occasionally in Scripture arms are used to symbolize human agency, usually for evil. When the psalmist prays, "Break the arm of the wicked and evil person. Punish his wickedness until you find no more" (Ps. 10:15), he is referring not to the literal breaking of arms but to the figurative breaking of the power of evil people and the hold they have on the powerless. He is in effect asking God's arm of judgment to be raised against the forces of evil in the world.

God's arm as a symbol for his power at work in the world can be an image of both comfort and fearsome judgment. For the believer, the image need not cause fear—God works on our behalf, both defending the causes of righteousness with his strength and bearing us up in the face of our troubles. But those who wield their power to work evil and injustice, opposing God's work in the world, should fear the arm of the Lord that has the power to bring them down.

Key Verse

Almighty LORD, you made heaven and earth by your great strength and powerful arm. Nothing is too hard for you. (Jer. 32:17)

*What have I to dread, what have I to fear,
Leaning on the everlasting arms?
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.*

*Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms;
Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.*

"Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" by
Anthony J. Showalter and Elisha Hoffman, 1887