

## THE ARK OF THE COVENANT (KAABAH): A MORPHOLOGICAL SYNTACTICAL STUDY

**Jones Ted Lauda Woy**

Universitas Klabat

*lwoy@unklab.ac.id*

### Abstract

*This article examines the object popularly referred to in Indonesian Christian discourse as kaabah in relation to the biblical Ark of the Covenant, through a detailed morphological–syntactical analysis of the Hebrew and Greek terms employed in Scripture. It argues that the term kaabah is not biblically derived but represents a later symbolic and cross-cultural adaptation. By analyzing the Hebrew *’ārôn* and the Greek *kibōtos*, the study demonstrates that the Ark functions as the theological center of covenant, divine presence, and atonement within the sanctuary system. The article further situates the Ark within Seventh-day Adventist sanctuary theology, showing its typological fulfillment in the person and heavenly ministry of Christ, as articulated especially in Hebrews 8–9 and Revelation 11. Interaction with major scholarly voices (Milgrom, Beale, Attridge, Lane, and Davidson) supports a Christological and eschatological reading consistent with Adventist theology.*

**Keywords:** Ark of the Covenant, Kaabah, Sanctuary, Christology, Typology.

### INTRODUCTION

In Indonesian Christian discourse, the term *kaabah* is sometimes used to denote the Ark of the Covenant. While symbolically motivated, this usage lacks philological grounding in the biblical text. The confusion arises from cross-cultural borrowing rather than from biblical semantics. This article argues that a return to the biblical languages—Hebrew and Greek—is essential for theological clarity, especially when the Ark of the Covenant is integrated into broader sanctuary and Christological frameworks.<sup>1</sup>

The objectives of this long-form study are fourfold: (1) to provide a rigorous morphological and syntactical analysis of the biblical terms for the Ark of the Covenant; (2) to trace the canonical development of the Ark motif from the Pentateuch through Revelation; (3) to situate the Ark within Seventh-day Adventist sanctuary theology; and (4) to engage critically with non-Advent scholarship on covenant fulfillment and Christology.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 572–73.

This article intentionally adopts a lexical–canonical–typological methodology, allowing linguistic precision to inform theological synthesis. Such an approach resists both atomistic word studies and purely metaphorical readings of sanctuary symbolism.<sup>2</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs an integrated methodology combining lexical analysis, canonical interpretation, and typological reasoning. This approach is particularly suited for sanctuary studies, where linguistic precision, narrative development, and theological fulfillment must be held together.

### Lexical Analysis

Lexical analysis examines the morphology, syntax, and semantic range of key terms (*ʿārôn*, *kibōtos*) within their immediate literary contexts. Standard lexicons such as HALOT and BDAG establish baseline meanings, while attention to grammatical constructions—especially the construct state in Hebrew and genitive relationships in Greek—clarifies relational and functional nuance.<sup>3</sup>

### Canonical Interpretation

Canonical interpretation traces the development of the Ark motif across the biblical canon, recognizing both continuity and progression. This approach assumes that later biblical texts intentionally reinterpret earlier sanctuary imagery rather than abrogate it. Hebrews and Revelation are therefore read as theological extensions of Pentateuchal sanctuary theology, not as replacements.<sup>4</sup>

### Typological Reasoning

Typology is understood as a historically grounded correspondence between divine acts that unfolds progressively. Following Davidson, typology involves escalation and fulfillment without negation.<sup>5</sup> The Ark functions as a historical reality that anticipates greater Christological fulfillment while retaining theological significance within salvation history.

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981), 145–52.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), 1:87–88.

<sup>4</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 82–85.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 150.

## THE ARK OF THE COVENANT IN THE PENTATEUCH AND PRIESTLY THEOLOGY

### The Ark in Exodus 25–40

The Ark of the Covenant is introduced in Exodus 25 as the first item of sanctuary furniture described, indicating its theological primacy. Its placement within the Most Holy Place underscores its role as the locus of divine presence. The instructions concerning the Ark emphasize relational function: it is the place where YHWH meets with Israel and speaks (Exod 25:22). The *kappōret* (mercy seat) atop the Ark serves as the ritual site of atonement, where blood is applied on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16).<sup>6</sup>

Milgrom's analysis of Priestly theology highlights that atonement rituals function to purge sanctuary space rather than appease divine wrath.<sup>7</sup> This insight reinforces the Ark's role as the focal point of covenant maintenance rather than magical power. The law deposited within the Ark further establishes the inseparability of covenant ethics and divine presence.

### The Ark and Holiness Theology

The Ark participates in a graded holiness system. Access is restricted not because of divine caprice but because holiness entails order.<sup>8</sup> The Ark thus embodies both divine nearness and transcendence. The Priestly texts resist objectifying holiness; instead, holiness is dynamic and relational, contingent upon covenant fidelity.

## THE ARK IN THE HISTORICAL AND PROPHETIC BOOKS

### The Ark and Israel's Kingship

In the Deuteronomistic History, the Ark appears as a symbol of divine kingship rather than military power. The narrative of 1 Samuel 4–6 demonstrates that the Ark cannot be manipulated for political ends.<sup>9</sup> Its capture by the Philistines paradoxically reveals YHWH's sovereignty beyond Israel's control.<sup>10</sup>

### Psalms and Zion Theology

Psalms such as Psalm 99 and 132 integrate the Ark into Zion theology, linking divine enthronement with covenant faithfulness.<sup>11</sup> The Ark functions liturgically as a sign of YHWH's

---

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1016–22.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 1031–35.

<sup>8</sup> Frank H. Gorman Jr., *The Ideology of Ritual* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 68–75.

<sup>9</sup> P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *I Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 109–18.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 34–39.

<sup>11</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 315–20.

reign. Yet even here, the Psalter avoids fetishizing the object, focusing instead on ethical obedience.

### The Ark's Absence and Prophetic Hope

Post-exilic texts rarely mention the Ark, creating a theological tension. Jeremiah 3:16 anticipates a future in which the Ark will no longer be remembered, not because covenant theology is abandoned, but because divine presence will be universalized.<sup>12</sup> This prepares the ground for New Testament reinterpretation.

## Morphological and Syntactical Analysis of the Ark of the Covenant

### The Hebrew Term אָרוֹן (‘*Ārôn*)

The primary Hebrew term for the Ark is אָרוֹן (‘*ārôn*), a masculine noun denoting a chest, box, or container. Morphologically, ‘*ārôn* is not transparently derived from a verbal root, suggesting that its meaning is concrete rather than action-based.<sup>13</sup>

Syntactically, ‘*ārôn* most frequently appears in the **construct state**, emphasizing relational identity rather than material description.<sup>14</sup> Key constructions include:

- אָרוֹן הַבְּרִית (‘*ārôn habbērît*) — “the Ark of the Covenant” (Exod 25:22)
- אָרוֹן יְהוָה (‘*ārôn YHWH*) — “the Ark of the LORD” (1 Sam 4:6)

These constructions function as genitives of possession and definition, underscoring that the Ark derives its sanctity from its covenantal association with YHWH, not from its physical form.<sup>15</sup> As Milgrom notes, holiness in the Priestly system is relational and derivative, not intrinsic.<sup>16</sup> Semantically, ‘*ārôn* may refer to ordinary containers (Gen 50:26), demonstrating that its sacrality is contextual rather than lexical.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 198–202.

<sup>13</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. by Johann Jakob Stamm (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), 1:87–88.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 136–140.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 141–145.

<sup>16</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, *Anchor Bible 3* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 732–740.

<sup>17</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 344.

### The Greek Term *κιβωτός* (*Kibōtos*)

The Septuagint translates *’ārōn* consistently as *κιβωτός* (*kibōtos*), a feminine noun meaning “box,” “chest,” or “container.”<sup>18</sup> In the New Testament, *kibōtos* appears sparingly but strategically, most notably in Hebrews 9:4 and Revelation 11:19.<sup>19</sup>

In Hebrews 9:4, the phrase *κιβωτὸς τῆς διαθήκης* (“Ark of the Covenant”) employs an attributive genitive, indicating that the Ark is characterized by covenantal function rather than architectural significance.<sup>20</sup> Attridge observes that Hebrews deliberately emphasizes function over form to advance its Christological argument.<sup>21</sup>

The use of *kibōtos* for Noah’s ark (Heb 11:7) and the Ark of the Covenant invites typological reflection: in both cases, the *kibōtos* serves as a divinely appointed means of preservation and salvation.<sup>22</sup>

### The Term “Kaabah” in Historical and Linguistic Perspective

The Indonesian term *kaabah* derives from the Arabic *ka’bah*, meaning “cube” or “central sanctuary.”<sup>23</sup> Philologically, this term is unrelated to *’ārōn* or *kibōtos*. The Arabic equivalent that properly corresponds to the Ark of the Covenant is *tābūt*, as used in Qur’an 2:248.<sup>24</sup>

The application of *kaabah* to the Ark in Indonesian Christian usage is therefore analogical rather than linguistic, reflecting a perceived similarity in function as a locus of divine presence. From a scholarly standpoint, however, this usage must be carefully qualified to avoid conceptual confusion.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 572–73.

<sup>19</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 206–210.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 84–86.

<sup>21</sup> Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 238–240.

<sup>22</sup> Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981), 150–155.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1976), 793.

<sup>24</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: Translation and Commentary* (Brentwood, MD: Amana, 1989), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 45–50.

## THE ARK OF THE COVENANT IN SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST SANCTUARY THEOLOGY

### The Ark and the Most Holy Place

Within Adventist theology, the Ark occupies the theological center of the sanctuary, located in the Most Holy Place and housing the Decalogue. The *kappōret* (mercy seat) above the Ark signifies the intersection of divine law and divine mercy (Exod 25:17–22). Davidson argues that this spatial theology reveals the moral foundation of God’s government.<sup>26</sup>

### Typology and Eschatology

Adventist sanctuary theology interprets the Ark typologically, particularly in relation to the Day of Atonement. Hebrews 9 situates the Ark within the framework of Christ’s high-priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. Lane emphasizes that Hebrews does not abolish sanctuary categories but reorients them Christologically.<sup>27</sup>

Revelation 11:19 further affirms the continuing theological significance of the Ark, portraying it within the heavenly temple at the eschatological climax. Beale notes that this vision links covenant fidelity, judgment, and worship in an end-time context.<sup>28</sup>

## CHRISTOLOGICAL FULFILLMENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament presents Christ as the fulfillment of the sanctuary typology. John 1:14 employs tabernacle language (*eskēnōsen*) to describe the incarnation, while Hebrews portrays Christ as both priest and sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> The Ark’s contents—the law, manna, and priestly rod—find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ’s obedience, sustenance of life, and divine authority.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Richard M. Davidson, “The Heavenly Sanctuary in the Old Testament,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 5 (1967): 45–58.

<sup>27</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, *Word Biblical Commentary* 47B (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 224–230.

<sup>28</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, *NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 598–602.

<sup>29</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 38–40.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 742–745.

From an Adventist perspective, Christ's ministry in the heavenly Most Holy Place preserves the theological continuity between Old and New Testaments, grounding doctrines such as the investigative judgment in a Christ-centered framework.<sup>31</sup>

### **Dialogue with Non-Advent Scholarship: Wright and Schreiner**

#### **N. T. Wright and Covenant Fulfillment**

N. T. Wright emphasizes that Second Temple Jewish concepts of covenant and temple reach their fulfillment in the person and mission of Jesus, particularly through the themes of exile, restoration, and new creation.<sup>32</sup> Wright argues that Jesus embodies the return of YHWH to Zion and thus redefines sacred space around himself rather than around cultic objects.<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, the Ark of the Covenant functions primarily as a symbol pointing forward to Christ, not as an enduring theological reality.<sup>34</sup>

While Seventh-day Adventist theology affirms Christ as the ultimate fulfillment of covenant and temple symbolism, it diverges from Wright by maintaining that the heavenly sanctuary remains the locus of Christ's ongoing high-priestly ministry.<sup>35</sup> The Ark's appearance in Revelation 11:19 suggests not merely symbolic fulfillment but continuity and transformation—the covenantal core endures, now administered by the exalted Christ.<sup>36</sup> Thus, Adventist theology can be understood as complementing Wright's Christocentric emphasis while resisting a complete collapse of sanctuary categories into metaphor alone.<sup>37</sup>

#### **Thomas R. Schreiner and the Finality of Christ's Sacrifice**

Thomas Schreiner, representing a Reformed evangelical perspective, stresses the finality and sufficiency of Christ's once-for-all sacrifice in Hebrews.<sup>38</sup> Schreiner tends to interpret sanctuary imagery as illustrative rather than structurally ongoing, viewing Christ's entrance into the heavenly sanctuary as a single, completed act rather than a multi-phased ministry.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *The Sanctuary and the Atonement* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015), 120–130.

<sup>32</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 268–272.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 653–660.

<sup>34</sup> N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 299–305.

<sup>35</sup> Richard M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 150–155.

<sup>36</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 598–602.

<sup>37</sup> Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 160.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 742–745.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 746–750.

Adventist sanctuary theology agrees fully with Schreiner on the non-repeatability of Christ's sacrifice but differs in its reading of priestly ministry. Hebrews 9 distinguishes between sacrifice and priestly application, allowing for a continuing intercessory role without undermining the finality of the cross.<sup>40</sup> The Ark of the Covenant, containing the law, thus remains the theological backdrop against which Christ's mediatorial work is understood—law and gospel united, not opposed.<sup>41</sup>

### **Evaluative Synthesis**

Both Wright and Schreiner rightly center Christ as the fulfillment of covenant and sanctuary imagery. However, their tendency to reduce spatial-temporal sanctuary motifs to purely Christological metaphors contrasts with the canonical witness of Hebrews and Revelation.<sup>42</sup> An Adventist reading affirms that typology does not negate ontology; rather, fulfillment presupposes continuity.<sup>43</sup> The Ark's role is therefore neither obsolete nor autonomous but christologically reconstituted.

### **Christological and Eschatological Integration**

The Ark of the Covenant integrates Christology and eschatology by holding together divine law, mercy, and judgment. Revelation 11:19 places the Ark at the center of the heavenly temple in an explicitly eschatological context, preceding the judgment scenes of Revelation 12–14.<sup>44</sup> Beale acknowledges this judicial dimension but interprets it primarily symbolically.<sup>45</sup> Adventist theology, by contrast, sees here a theological basis for a pre-Advent judgment rooted in covenant accountability.<sup>46</sup>

Christ's ministry in the heavenly Most Holy Place thus unites soteriology and ethics: salvation is grounded in Christ's atoning work, while judgment affirms the enduring moral will of God embodied in the law within the Ark.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> William L. Lane, Hebrews 9–13, 224–230.

<sup>41</sup> Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*, 120–130.

<sup>42</sup> G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 624–630.

<sup>43</sup> Davidson, *Typology in Scripture*, 145–152.

<sup>44</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 598–602.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Rodríguez, *Sanctuary and the Atonement*, 140–150.

<sup>47</sup> Davidson, "Heavenly Sanctuary," 45–58.

## CONCLUSION

This long-form study has demonstrated that the term *kaabah* lacks morphological and syntactical grounding in the biblical text and should be regarded, at best, as a symbolic cultural adaptation.<sup>48</sup> The biblical terms *’ārôn* and *kibōtos* consistently portray the Ark of the Covenant as the covenantal center of divine presence, law, and atonement.<sup>49</sup>

Engagement with both Adventist and non-Adventist scholarship reveals that sanctuary typology cannot be reduced to metaphor without loss of biblical coherence. Within Seventh-day Adventist theology, the Ark of the Covenant remains christologically fulfilled yet theologically operative, grounding doctrines of Christ’s heavenly ministry and eschatological judgment. Precision in language, attentiveness to the biblical languages, and dialogue across theological traditions are therefore essential for a robust and credible sanctuary theology.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Attridge, Harold W. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Hermeneia. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.

Bauer, Walter, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Beale, G. K. *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011.

———. *The Book of Revelation*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel*. Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990.

Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.

———. *The Gospel of John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.

Childs, Brevard S. *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.

Davidson, Richard M. *Typology in Scripture: A Study of Hermeneutical Τύπος Structures*.

---

<sup>48</sup> Hans Wehr, *Arabic Dictionary*, 793.

<sup>49</sup> Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT*, 1:87–88.

- Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series 2. Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981.
- . “The Heavenly Sanctuary in the Old Testament.” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 5 (1967): 45–58.
- Gorman, Frank H., Jr. *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology*. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990.
- Griffith, Sidney H. *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the ‘People of the Book’ in the Language of Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Revised by Johann Jakob Stamm. Translated by M. E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000.
- Lane, William L. *Hebrews 9–13*. Word Biblical Commentary 47B. Dallas: Word Books, 1991.
- Mays, James L. *Psalms*. Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994.
- McCarter, P. Kyle, Jr. *I Samuel*. Anchor Bible 8. New York: Doubleday, 1980.
- Milgrom, Jacob. *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Anchor Bible 3. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- Rodríguez, Ángel Manuel. *The Sanctuary and the Atonement*. Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015.
- Sarna, Nahum M. *Genesis*. JPS Torah Commentary. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008.
- Thompson, J. A. *The Book of Jeremiah*. New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.
- Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.
- Waltke, Bruce K., and M. O’Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
- Wehr, Hans. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Edited by J. Milton Cowan. Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services, 1976.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

———. *The New Testament and the People of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Yusuf Ali, Abdullah. *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary*. Brentwood, MD: Amana Corporation, 1989.