

BOKIS KONTRAK: AN ENGAN ARK OF THE COVENANT

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Philip Gibbs shares with us the Engan experience of the commemoration of the golden jubilee of the coming of the Good News to their province. As part of the event leading to the main celebration, the Ark of the covenant was carried from parish to parish. Engans re-enacted the Hebrew experience of wandering through the wilderness to the promised land.

"Before the coming of the Christian faith we were still in Egypt. With the good news we are led to the promised land. The people of Israel were forty years in the wilderness. Maybe we too are still travelling in the desert?"¹

The sentiments expressed above by a young man from the Enga Province in the PNG Highlands indicate an insight into the religious experience of his people today. People understand that they have been freed for a new way of life, and they live with the expectation that the promise will become a reality. Yet they also experience the harsh reality of daily life. The experience is probably shared by Christians throughout the world. Yet Engan people, with the brevity of their exposure to the good news, and the vibrancy of their faith, have an acute sense of being still on a journey through the wilderness. Recent events in the Province illustrate their experience in a dramatic way. This paper, based on participant observation between June and August, 1996, is an attempt to examine their experience in the light of the history of the people of Israel. It is an example of how the Old Testament story can become our story. The paper will compare certain instances of the Israelite experience of God's presence and power associated with the ark of the covenant and compared it with the Engan experience. The comparison

will lead to a reflection on the Engan experience of wilderness and of the promised land, and finally to consideration of an appropriate spirituality for today.

Ark of the Covenant

When the people of Israel accompanied Moses in the Passover from Egypt to the desert of Sinai the Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Ex 13, 21-22). After Moses' encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai, the Israelites were instructed to build a sanctuary so that Yahweh could "dwell among them" (Ex 25,8). The book of Exodus contains detailed instructions for the construction of the sanctuary, including the ark of the covenant. Forty years later when they accompanied Joshua across the Jordan river from the wilderness into the Promised land, the Lord's presence was represented in the ark of the covenant which the priests carried in front of them. We read that through God's power, symbolised in the ark, they crossed over the Jordan on dry ground (Josh 4,22). Later, accompanied by the ark they overran the city of Jericho. Thus the ark served an important religious and political function as it was carried to the sanctuaries like Bethel and Shiloh in the early years of Israel. When David brought the ark into Jerusalem he was so overcome with joy that he leapt and danced half-naked "before the Lord" (2 Sam 6,14-16).

Recently in the Enga Province, people have been following a modern-day ark of the covenant. It all began when Catholics in the Wabag diocese wanted to commemorate the year of the Bible and also the coming of the missionaries to their mountainous province fifty years before. A catechist came up with the idea of carrying a Bible from parish to parish following the path of the early missionaries. People developed the idea. Each parish was to have a time of preparation for receiving the special symbol of God's Word. Retreat teams were trained in the parishes, and these teams went around leading week-long retreats in the various communities. They decided that the Bible was to travel in

style---in a specially decorated box modelled after the ark of the Old Testament. The box was made from hard *kwila* wood, with glass panels so that the Bible was visible to all. Handles were fitted and a carved bird of paradise mounted on top. The ark, or *bokis kontrak* as they termed it in Melanesian pidgin, was to symbolise God's presence through the Word in their midst. For four months, from April to August 1996, the ark was carried around the parishes and "outstations" of the diocese. During the whole of that time---day and night---the ark was seldom if ever left alone.

Carrying the Ark

The Israelites had priests carry the ark of the covenant or used a cart (Josh 3,3; 2 Sam 6,3). In the Enga province there are no beasts of burden and people themselves carry goods over the rough terrain. Thus, even on the highway the ark was carried on people's shoulders. People from the Tsak Valley told how those assigned to carry the ark were usually chosen with great care. First the community would decide what message they wanted to convey to those who were next in line to receive the ark. If they wanted to show that their leaders had experienced a change of heart, they would have some leading men carry the ark. If, on the other hand they wanted to convey a message of humility, they would ask women to carry it, because publicly women take a position of deference in the society. Knowing that the receiving community would read meaning in everything they did, they would choose people with appropriate names. Choosing a man by the name of *Yaki* meaning "gather together" would convey an invitation to celebrate together. Choosing someone by the name of *Batasa* meaning "road" would invite the other group to walk together with them on the same journey through life. Those from the receiving community would be quick to read the message in the names of those carrying the ark. They would read the signs first and then reply with an appropriate saying or song.

As the ark progressed in the four month journey around the province, rumours began to circulate, and some members of other churches became alarmed. Had the Catholics found a "new Bible"? Would one die if one saw it? Was it a sign of the end of the world? People questioned every detail. Why a glass box? Who were the ones appointed to carry it?

People's interest developed and stories began to circulate of signs and wonders associated with the ark. Many people spoke of having a conversion experience (*tanim bel*), and parish priests commented on the increasing number of faithful requesting the sacrament of reconciliation. Some missionaries began to wonder if they were witnessing the initial stages of a new religious "movement!" At the end of three months, in a demonstration of faith, 10,000 people representing all 16 parishes of the Wabag diocese, paraded joyously with the ark through the streets of the provincial capital. Some wore traditional finery, others a uniform identifying them with a particular group in the church. Some acted out events associated with the coming of the missionaries. All prayed and sang religious songs that they had composed for the occasion.

God's presence

Psalms 24, which is commonly believed to have been used during a procession with the ark, refers to the entrance of the "King of glory". Yahweh was in the heavens, yet, Yahweh's "glory" (*kabod*) was present with the ark of the covenant. The capture of the ark by the Philistines was lamented as the departure of Yahweh's glory from Israel (1 Sam 4,21). Yahweh could not be represented in any image, yet Yahweh Sabaoth (Lord of Hosts) was invisibly present enthroned upon the cherubim (1 Sam 4,4). This became known as the "mercy seat" or "footstool" where Yahweh's *kabod* (glory or heaviness) was present (1 Chr 28,2).

Many of those who carried the ark around the Enga province said that they found it surprisingly heavy. Some said that it must be made

of cement!² The common explanation was that they were carrying "Jesus". This kind of explanation of heaviness in a ritual setting as spiritual presence is common in Engan culture. Some treated the "ark" containing the Bible as though it symbolised Jesus' presence in a very real way. An old woman walked over the mountains to meet the ark coming from the neighbouring parish. It was late afternoon, with chilly rain falling when she finally met the people coming her way. She tried to stay with them as they carried the Bible to her parish, but she was too weak and could not keep up. It was the early hours of the morning when she finally arrived at her parish church where the people were having an all night Bible vigil. As she came in she was heard to cry, "Jesus! I went to find you at Lawe. Then you left me behind!"

Leaders often made reference to God's presence in their speeches. One leader, using symbolism that certainly would not be appreciated by a Jewish audience, likened the journey of the ark to passage of a prize pig in the Enga *tee* pig exchange.³ The leader of the *tee* was respected not only for his ability to maintain relationships with influential people, but also for the way he made sure that the wealth would be shared among all people, rich and poor. The speaker noted how the ark had a message for all people irrespective of people's abilities or possessions. He continued,

"The God whose presence we have explained while carrying the *bokis kontrak* around our communities is that same God who was with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the same God who rules now. It will be the same God for the future generations. That presence is certainly present in this box. With peace in your heart, come and take it to your place..."⁴

Among those who encountered the ark in the Enga province, many had a powerful experience of God's presence.⁵ Some did not want to venture too close. When interviewed, a woman said, "I was standing at a distance when the ark arrived at my village. I didn't go closer to

examine it because I feared God. I know that I am a sinner, and also I had heard stories about people being struck down after making disrespectful comments about the ark. So I stood some distance away from the ark and just let its mercy touch me".⁶

God's Power

God's presence is often perceived in terms of power, which could be dangerous or beneficial. Yahweh's glory was like a devouring fire (Ex 24,17). Touching the ark, even unintentionally could mean being struck dead (2 Sam 6,7). With the procession of the ark of the covenant into the temple, Yahweh returned as a mighty warrior and a glorious king (Ps 24, 7-10).

The Engan people were impressed by God's power symbolised in the ark. The "eye for an eye" mentality is common in Engan society and is often expressed in tribal warfare. Likewise, God's power is sometimes understood as the power to avenge evil. In the Tsak valley where the Catholic mission complex was devastated in tribal conflict, some people were afraid that God might want to avenge the destruction. Others, in an act of faith sang:

*Israel kumba piino ongome
naima apata pyato lao baepele
doko kaita epene lamo*

You renewed the people of Israel,
You likewise renew us,
so you, the Bible, have walk to here

Some people felt that the very presence of the Word in the ark was enough to ensure God's protection. It usually takes one long day to cross a section of uninhabited mountains between Porgera and Kandep. However, the group carrying the ark became lost in the thick forest. They were without food or shelter as they tramped on hoping to find signs of human habitation. After three days and nights they finally arrived at their destination hungry and exhausted. People believe there is a mythical snake living under the ground in the forest where they had to pass. Being lost was a sign of the struggle between good and evil

-- between God's Word and the powers of darkness symbolised in the subterranean serpent. After three days they escaped from the valley of death to the safety of a welcoming community. In modern Western society it is sometimes felt necessary to demythologise personifications of evil, but that would be self-defeating in Enga. Like Leviathan or sea-serpents of the Israelites (Isa 27,1; Am 9,3) snake figures and other evil creatures are a significant part of the Engan world. Those who survived the three days in the forest say simply, "the ark saved us".⁷

The Wilderness

The early Israelites were nomadic pastoralists and later cultivators and town dwellers. It is commonly held that after leaving with Egypt the group of fugitive slaves sought to return to a land where they could settle down. Having begun to settle in Canaan, they never forgot their religious experience as pastoralists. The ark began as a portable shrine with the desert nomads and ended up in the Temple in Jerusalem (Ps 132).⁸ Jewish festivals often combine two traditions, for example, the feast of the Passover has its origins in the pastoral semi-nomadic existence before the Exodus. Later it was combined with, an agricultural feast (the feast of the Unleavened bread marking the beginning of the barley harvest) celebrated after the settlement in Canaan. Later, nearer the time of Jesus, they took on a profound new meaning as commemoration of the covenant with Yahweh.

What new meanings have emerged in the Engan interpretation of the ark event? The Enga experience is expressed in very different ways from that of the Israelites. Modern day Engans are mainly cultivators and pig herders, with a tradition of hunting and gathering in the more remote areas. In a few places people are gathering into small towns. Apart from the refugees from tribal fights, the majority of people live on their own clan land, and their wilderness experience is more at the level of modern pressures and conflicting values. The promised land of peace and prosperity seems tantalisingly close on TV screens, yet in reality it is still a dream.

Symbols of Life in the Wilderness

The Engan religious worldview reveres nature and its forces and used symbols from the world around them. Christian belief does not deny this worldview, but builds upon it. Thus very often that faith is expressed symbols from their forest and garden culture with its concern for the maintenance of the life-force that is the basis of cosmic and human well-being. Where faithfulness to the covenant is the key to understanding the Old Testament, the protection and sustenance of life is the key to understanding the Melanesian religious worldview. The life theme appears frequently in their songs. For example, consider the following choruses from the Saka valley:

<i>Kamongonya buku o laipi buku</i>	God's book, that book of life,
<i>Jubili palipomo epepe</i>	are you coming because there will be a Jubilee?

<i>Kamongonya buku, laipi buku</i>	God's book, the book of life,
<i>tanga ulunya mee pilyo napate</i>	you will not return above without accomplishing something.

The first chorus refers to the Jubilee in the diocese to celebrate 50 years of the good news.⁹ The second is a reference to the water cycle and the Word returning only after accomplishing its purpose (Isa 55, 10-11). Both highlight the life-giving nature of the Bible. The symbols of life recur often, using images from their world of forest covered mountains and food gardens. God's Word is said to be like a green leaf that never loses its lush vitality. It is like a water spout with living water.¹⁰ People in the Wanepap parish sang,

<i>Ee Kataisanya pii omonya</i>	Christ's Word has excited me,
<i>mona mendesilyamona ee,</i>	give me a shoot from it so
<i>pee wanenya waingi lyoo</i>	I can plant it for my children
<i>nyoo pato pee</i>	

In the first parishes the ark visited, people sometimes carried flaming bamboo torches as a sign that God's Word lights up their darkness. Prayers voiced the sentiment that violence and fighting should never extinguish that light. Later the light was replaced by other symbols. In Keman men dressed as for the *sangai* initiation rites in which the central symbol is a sacred *lepe* plant.¹¹ In Kandep people carried staffs decorated with *metae* and *nangau* ferns. Traditionally these were used for decoration and to cover sacred objects in the initiation rites, or other ritual settings. In Wanepap they sang about unwrapping the ferns so as to reveal the Word.

*Okaita mende lelyamo o
mende lelyamo*

Something is happening there.

*lyangalo o Kamongonya wai yaki
lyangalo*

I unwrapped it and saw God's
Word within

Are these symbols simply quaint ways of incorporating harmless horticultural symbols in their expression of faith? It could very well be more than that. For example, as a symbolic gesture of acceptance of the Word, some communities constructed "gates" decorated with *metae* ferns and other symbols of the sacred. A rope made from leaves and vines extended across the gate stopping free passage. Upon the arrival of the ark, there were prayers and songs, and then a leader would cut the rope. The rope symbolises whatever prevents the good news from entering people's hearts. Cutting the vine is the gesture of them being freed from whatever impedes them from being truly open to the Word.

What is it that people want to be freed from? Often the sentiments expressed in songs and prayers indicate a desire to be free from the trials of daily life. One song expresses it this way.

*Kenda yaki soo wati yaki soo,.
Yuu Enga katapupa, nisipae
mende nanyilyo.*

Carrying the burdens of problems
and worries in Enga, I receive no help.

Epene pawa aipa piape?

What happened to heaven's power?

Is this the desert that the young man referred to at the beginning of this paper? A desert is a place of temptation, the place of evil spirits and wild animals. It is a harsh place where people struggle to survive. Paradoxically the desert is also the place where people go to find God (Hos 2, 14-15; Is 40, 3-5). Many people in Enga feel like they are in a wilderness, in a period of transition between a past they have lost and a future with the promises of fortune and well-being. Many are weary of violence and warfare and look for a peaceful dwelling on their land. As is typical of people in Melanesia, they characterise the desired future in terms of life in its fullness which is considered by many to be the key to the sacred in Melanesia. Thus the ark is said to contain the "book of life". To truly accept the Word would mean *gutpela sindaun* (well-being in all dimensions of one's life). In that event refugees could return to their homelands and people could experience a time of peace and security. The problem according to some in Pumakos parish, is that people haven't made sufficient effort, so now, "God's Word itself has come to bring justice to the Engan people".¹² Will God's Word simply overcome human sinfulness, or will it somehow involve human effort in bringing about a just world?

Promised Land

Politics features in the search for the good life today. However the political leadership in the Enga Province is in a state of chronic conflict, resulting in a state of anarchy and inefficiency.¹³ Political success for the supporters of one candidate often means disaster for the many others who do not succeed to political office. Nevertheless election fever occupies a great deal of time and attention. The Province has the second largest gold mine in the world. The majority of Engan see very little actual benefit from the mine. Alternative means to prosperity are business ventures, steady employment (particularly in the public service), or seeking one's fortune in the capital city "Moresby". While people might dream of holding office or of getting a grant or loan to start a "project", the reality is one littered with dashed hopes.

Another avenue is the search for *gutpela sindaun* in the various movements and groups trying to find ways to a just and lasting peace in the province. Some of these ventures are meeting with success, and the churches have a big role to play in this. These developments are not unrelated to the Enga search for a "promised land".

Yet faith expression in the Catholic church appears to take little notice of such political and socio-economic realities, except to remain independent from them. The celebration of 50 years of the good news in Enga was anticipated by one year because it was felt that 1997 being an election year, politics would make religious celebrations difficult.

People's expressions of faith in hymn singing, particularly those of young people show a strong "other-worldly" emphasis. Songs stress how people should accept the Word so that they can go to be with God. There are many choruses with sentiments similar to the following:

<i>Mee pititu epene bona lenge doko</i>	Going to heaven is better than doing
<i>yaingi yai lyilyamo</i>	nothing here. I am needed there. ¹⁴

Catholics have been taught to believe in "heaven" and "hell" and these symbols recur in recent songs. There are frequent references to the possibility of going to one place or the other. One well known song uses the image of the bus drivers who call out to let prospective passengers know where they are going:

<i>Kate mendeme Akena Akena lao,</i>	Like the PMVs that stop and call
<i>Wapaka, Wapaka lao silyamo</i>	Hagen, Hagen, Wabag, Wabag,
<i>opa pyoo Gotenya pii angeme</i>	this Word of God calls for
<i>Epene, Epene lao sia silyamo</i>	heaven.
<i>Pii ange-o sepala nasili pitambano</i>	If we hear and ignore this call,
<i>Gotenya lasa de ele paia</i>	on God's last day
<i>paipu lata-pyaa</i>	He will send you to Hell-fire.

The "last day" is not a favourite topic of traditional Catholic teaching, yet the topic often surfaces in prayers and songs of Enga Catholics. Whether the people are adopting a spirituality from the Pentecostal churches, or whether the ark is feeding into a general millenarian uneasiness in the province would be debated. At Pumakos the Catholic community sang:

<i>Kamongonya buku o laipi buku</i>	God's book, the book of life,
<i>epepe o gii mende palipuma epepe</i>	have you come because the
<i>o wee?</i>	time has come?

Rumours have been circulating that the world will end in the year 2000. The reference here is to that event and whether the Bible with the ark has come as a warning. Some say that the pilgrimage with the ark is God's "last mercy". One person commented, "I think the Bible is circulating around to say "good-bye" to the people".¹⁵

Many of the songs highlight the saving power of the Word in the context of the "last day". One should pay attention to the Word now because soon there won't be any more time to listen. One very popular song expresses it in a poetic way:

<i>Angapi etelyamopa</i>	At the end of the pandanus season
<i>anga tende pingi.</i>	the last pandanus nuts are more tasty.
<i>Opa pyoo Gotenya pii etalaya</i>	Similarly, God's Word is sweet
<i>piamopa pii tende pilyamo</i>	because it is near the end.

At this point, many questions arise. How much do such songs reflect people's beliefs? Do the other-worldly, millenarian sentiments expressed influence the way people live out their faith? If so, how do people cope with "worldly" realities? If, however, the other-worldly sentiments have little bearing on people's lives, then does this indicate an undesirable dualism? A way to attend to these issues may be found in looking again at the experience of the people of Israel and the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

A New Covenant

According to the book of Deuteronomy (Deut 10, 1-5). The ark served as an archive for the tablets of stone upon which Moses wrote the words of the covenant. Thus it came to be called the ark of the covenant. Israel was Yahweh's special possession (Deut 14,2) and therefore possessed a right to the promised land. When the Hebrews settled in Canaan, the ark came to be honoured in their sanctuaries as a symbol of the covenant and of Yahweh's presence in their midst.

The Engan ark is also an ark of the covenant. It contains the Christian Bible, signifying the good news of the fulfilment of Yahweh's covenant in Jesus Christ. The Old Testament story can become our story, but the presence of Jesus brings that story to fulfilment in a special way. *The essence of this new covenant may be summarised as, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another"* (Jn 13,34). Those who obey the new commandment will be considered to be Jesus' disciples.

There have been many examples of this new covenant in the passage of the ark around the Enga province. A notable feature of the passage of the ark is the degree to which it has promoted reconciliation between hostile groups. Sometimes it takes generations before there is reconciliation after tribal warfare. In this situation the Bible in the ark has had a powerful influence. Groups that had been fighting have decided to make peace and seek justice so that the Word could come to their community.

One such reconciliation ceremony involved two groups on either side of a big river.¹⁶ The war had gone on for years and many people had been killed. Children could not go to school, and people lived in fear. On the day of the arrival of the ark, both sides, numbering several thousand people, gathered with their supporters. They had left their weapons at home and many wore traditional finery with bird feather head-dresses. Church leaders gave speeches, catechists led prayers,

policemen said how relieved they were that at last there would be peace. Then the leaders of the groups that had been fighting came forward, placed the ark on their shoulders and shook hands. Everyone broke out in loud applause. Some started singing a refrain.

<i>Kataisanya baepeleme Lakaipa</i>	With Christ's Bible I will build
<i>toko pyakatona,</i>	a bridge across the Lagaip River,
<i>kingi toko sina loo nyaa</i>	Create a bridge with your hands

In other words, by shaking hands under the ark with the Bible they were rebuilding the relationships that had been broken in the fighting. There was now a new bridge, built not with steel or timber, but through reconciliation based on faith in the Word. This modern "passover" illustrates the influence of the new covenant as people seek to heal the ravages of war and violence.¹⁷

Conclusion

Many examples could be given of how the ark in the diocese of Wabag became a sign of the new covenant between God and humankind in fulfilment of the words of the prophet Jeremiah that in a new covenant the "Law" would be written in human hearts (Jer 31,31-34). Such efforts to actualise the new covenant seem at odds with the other-worldly spirituality found in many songs. The actualising approach affirms the importance of faith commitment and involvement in this world and its problems. The other type of spirituality can easily be an escape from the problems of earthly existence. Behind these two perspectives lie different theologies of salvation. Is salvation something other-worldly in regard to which the present life is merely a test, or is salvation to be found with Christ present at the heart of human history?

The other-worldly approach has its origins in Western dualistic thought, different from the holistic perspective of Melanesian religions. Traditional Enga spirituality does not divide the sacred and the profane, but regards them as part of one reality. The fullness of life or *gutpela*

sindaun, (the Engan concept of salvation) is a communal affair, attained through healthy reciprocal relationships with the living and the dead, and maintained through gifts and exchange.

In a similar way, Biblical spirituality tends to have strong links to this world and its history. With no understanding of another world other than "Sheol", the early theology in the Old Testament viewed salvation in terms of religious and socio-political realities. The creator of the world was the redeemer of Israel. With the prophets, covenant (*berit*) was sometimes linked with *mispat* (justice) and *shalom* (peace). To possess *shalom* is to be whole and complete, reconciled with oneself, one's neighbours and with God. We have an image of *shalom* in Isaiah, where people "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isa 2, 4)¹⁸ and where the wolf and the lamb lie peacefully together (Isa 11,6-9). Following the customary usage of his time, *shalom* was Jesus' greeting to his friends (Jn 20, 21).

Jesus' healing and casting out demons were signs of the saving presence of God's kingdom. His incarnation and his life and death imply involvement in the demands of this world. The resurrection too reminds us that Christ can be present today, particularly in situations where people strive for life in the face of death. Thus, while not denying the transcendent purpose of the fulfilment of the kingdom, participation in it clearly entails involvement in temporal, earthly, social and material realities. The good news is a way of life.

The notions of *berit shalom* or covenant of peace (Num 25, 12), and the kingdom as a kingdom of life appear to be relevant to the Enga search for *gutpela sindaun*. The good news as *rot bilong laip* (road to life) could incorporate the natural symbols from the forest and horticultural environment of the Enga world. Emphasis would be given to faith bearing fruit. Peace, justice, love and freedom which are fruits of the kingdom are also social realities with human consequences. Life is not a possession of individuals, but a quality of living in community. Life found through harmonious relationships requires a transformation from a selfish

to a loving way of life. It could be stressed that for the Christian, transformation comes as a result of a faith commitment to Jesus Christ who is the source of life. Jesus has entered into our world and has invited us to a faith commitment that leads to working for the welfare of men and women. God's Word confronts situations in which people suffer, thus as followers of Christ we have a mission to work for justice and towards the transformation of our world.

Perhaps the most important insight is to realise that in a certain sense the mission of the *bokis kontrak* is to be found in the journey itself. People have to be reconciled to the prospect that they, like Moses, will remain in the wilderness. As the Israelites found out, the desert can be a place where people encounter God. Moreover, through actualising the new covenant of love and preparing for the gift of the kingdom they can participate in the transformation of the desert. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that Yahweh would "make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert....I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people" (Isa 43, 20-21). Perhaps Enga Catholics are still in the desert. However, they should not be so concerned about a promised land, but rather with the life-giving transformation that comes from knowing that the journey they are on has a purpose and that they are not alone. They don't have to be searching for another "road" to *gutpela sindaun*. One of the group lost in the forest for three days between Porgera and Kandep had this to say afterwards.

"In the Old Testament the people of Israel did not arrive quickly at the promised land. In fact Canaan was not a long way away but they went around and around and took a long time to get there. In the same way, Kandep was not too far away from us, but we were lost nearby. This helps us realise that the Kingdom of God or Heaven, is not far from us, but it is just our faith that makes us think that it is really far away".¹⁹

Hopefully the follow up to these dramatic events will help Enga Christians to realise that faith will make an impact when it touches all aspects of life, and where there is no real separation between the secular

and the sacred. Even in the midst of suffering and death, salvation has begun. We accept God's gift of salvation and new life, precisely in our "active waiting" for the kingdom of life. Rather than being concerned about the "last day" we must live in hope that one day the desert will flower and bear fruit.

Endnotes:

1. The words are from Engan seminarian George Waekane. I would like to thank the many people who have contributed to the research for this paper, especially Joseph Lakani.
2. "Ol i tok olsem dispela bokis em ol i wokim long simen na wanpela baibel i stap insait. Ol i tok em i hevi nogut tru na planti man i lusim strong bilong ol na i dai pinis taim ol i karim dispela bokis kontrak. Mi ting olsem taim em i kam long peris bilong mi bai mi traim long apim em na sapos em i hevi, bai i no ken karim" (They said that the ark was made of cement with a Bible inside. They said that it was very heavy and that many men had become exhausted and had died from carrying it. I decided that when it came to my parish, I would try lifting it and if it was heavy, I would not carry it. (Man from Keman/Alakuli parish).
3. The speaker is John Yukis from Yampu.
4. Mipela makim olsem bikos mipela pilim tru God i stap long dispela bokis na i no buk baibel nating. (We did this because we really felt that God was present in the ark and not simply a bible book). God kam long mak bilong bokis i bikipela samting tru long laip bilong em. (God symbolised in the ark is a very important thing in my life). Mi lapun na bai klostu indai tasol bai mi dai wantaim amamas bikos mi lukim God long mak bilong Buk insait long bokis. Dispela em i wanpela bikipela samting long bilip bilong mi. (I am old and I will soon die, but I will die happy because I have seen God symbolised in the book in the ark. This is something very important for my faith. (Lepre patient, Yampu hospital).
5. The woman is from Wanepap parish. Compare the reaction of the people when Moses came down from the mountain (Ex 20: 18-21).
6. The song is somewhat ambiguous. With the change of just one vowel, it could have the opposite meaning. If the term *Komba* would be heard as *kumba*, then the song would mean: You punished the people of Israel, so You, the bible have walked here to kill us". It appears that some people did interpret it in this negative sense.
7. With hindsight there are many explanations as to why the incidents occurred. Some say that it happened because some had gone on ahead of the ark instead of following it. "Narapela tingting tu i olsem mipela i no bin bihainim bokis kontrak gut dispela taim. Mipela larim bokis kontrak i go long rot bilong em yet na mipela bihainim laik bilong mipela long narapela rot. Bikos mipela bihainim laik bilong mipela yet, God i mas lusim mipela o samting olsem na mipela i go klostu dai na lus olgeta long narapela ples". (Another opinion would be that this time we did not really follow the ark. We let the ark go on its way and we went on our own way on a different path. Because we went our

own way, it was as though God left us, and we nearly perished somewhere else). (Young man from Tsikiro parish).

8. The ark of the covenant seems to have disappeared by the beginning of the sixth century BC. A modern commentary (Anchor) mentions the opinion that Jeremiah may have hid it from the Babylonians.
9. In fact it was 49 years which can compare with the biblical jubilee to celebrate God's goodness in the seventh sabbatical year (Levit. 25).
10. Gotenya pii ongo Gotenya pii-o saka yoko pingi lumu, saa ipa kendo-yale ipao kalyamo Horticultural images are not foreign to the Bible, for example, Psalm 80: "You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land...."
11. For an explanation of the *lepe* symbol, see P. Gibbs, "Lepe: An Exercise in Horticultural Theology", *Catalyst* 18.3 (1988): 215-234. In Wanepap, Matthew Wet, commenting on the Word of God said, "Bipo *lepe* em i samting tru na i wankain long tok bilong God" (Before, the *lepe* plant was really something really important, similar to God's Word).
12. Ol i save les long kirapim gutpela sindaun olsem na Tok bilong God yet i kam stretim ol manmeri bilong Enga.
13. In 1996 the Enga provincial governor has been suspended due to court action involving charges of misconduct in office. Meanwhile the acting governor and the acting deputy governor are engaged in a protracted struggle for the province's top post.
14. From Kandep. People use various expressions interchangeably: *kaitinya katenge* (existing in the sky), *kaitinya isingi mate* (place of power in the sky), *Gotenya isingi mate* (place where God rules), *Paradais* (Paradise), *kindam* (kingdom), *Epene* (heaven).
15. "Mi ting baibel i wok long go raun tok gutbai long olgeta pipel bilong em." (Bruno, Keman parish).
16. The fight was between the Tekepaini and Tupini clans across the Lagaip River.
17. It is not only fighting clans that have built bridges. In many cases ties between churches have been strengthened. For example, though carrying of the Bible around the Province has been a Catholic initiative, many Lutheran church communities have helped provide food and have joined in to honour God's Word. In the isolated Maramuni Valley Seventh Day Adventist church leaders helped with accommodation for the pilgrims. After the disoriented group emerged exhausted and hungry from three days in the forest, a United Church community killed pigs and a cassowary to feed the pilgrims.
18. Trends have too often been the other way around, where water pipe is fashioned into gun barrels and roofing iron into shields.
19. Interview with Joe Rex from Tsikiro.