



The *Bokis Kontrak* ark arriving at Kililamu, Kasap Parish

## An Old Testament Story Becomes Our Story

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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. 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, symbolized in the ark, they crossed over the Jordan on dry ground (Jos 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.

Recently in the Enga Province in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, people have been following a modern-day ark of the covenant. It all began when Catholics in the Wabag diocese wanted to commemorate the coming of the missionaries to their mountainous province fifty years ago. 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 symbolize 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 (Jos 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. Those from the receiving community would be quick to read the message in those chosen to carry the ark. They would read the signs first and then reply with an appropriate saying or song.

As the ark progressed in its four month journey around the province, rumors 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? What color was the Bible? 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 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

Psalm 24, which is commonly believed to have been used during a procession with the ark of the covenant, refers to the entrance of the "King of glory." Yahweh was in the heavens, yet, Yahweh's "glory" 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 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 Ch 28:2).

Many of those who carried the ark around the Enga province said that they found it surprisingly heavy. Some even said that it must be made of cement! The common explanation was that they were carrying "Jesus." Some treated the "ark" containing the Bible as though it symbolized Jesus' presence

in a very real way. An old woman walked over the mountains to meet the ark coming from the neighboring 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 back 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!"

Among those who encountered the ark in the Enga province, many had a powerful experience of God's presence. 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."

### **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 symbolized 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 has been destroyed in tribal conflict, someone observed, "Now many people felt God's power in the ark. Many were afraid that God might destroy them and they changed and joined the Christian community. The fight destroyed everything here. So we sang:

*"You punished the people of Israel,  
so are you coming to kill us?"*

God's power was not seen just as an avenging power. 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 two parishes, 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 symbolized 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 demythologize 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."

### **The Wilderness**

The early Israelites were nomadic pastoralists and later cultivators and town dwellers. 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. 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 a 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 tantalizingly close on TV screens, yet in reality it is still a dream.

The Engan religious worldview reveres nature and its forces and uses symbols from the world around them. Christian belief does not deny this worldview, but builds upon it. Thus very often that faith is expressed in 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. 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. People in the Wanepap parish sang,

*Christ's Word has excited me,  
give me a shoot from it  
so I can plant it for my children.*

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. These events are more than simple ways of incorporating harmless horticultural symbols into the people's expression of faith. For example, as a symbolic



**Carrying the ark in the Paieka Valley**

gesture of acceptance of the Word, some communities constructed "gates" decorated with special 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 symbolizes 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. 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 Mela-

nesia, they characterize the desired future in terms of life in its fullness which is considered by many to be the key to the sacred in Melanesia. To truly accept the Word would mean *gutpela sitdaun*: a time when refugees could return to their homelands and people could experience a time of peace and security.

### Promised Land

Within the Enga Province, the mine at Porgera is one of the largest gold mines in the world. The majority of Engans see very little actual benefit from the mine. Alternative means to prosperity are business ventures, employment, or seeking one's fortune in the capital city "Moresby." While people might dream of holding political 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 sitdaun* 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."

People's expressions of faith in hymn singing, particularly those of young people show a strong "other-worldly" emphasis. Their sense of frustration is shown in choruses like the following:

*Going to heaven is better  
than doing nothing here.*

In such a situation, it is not surprising that the "last day" often surfaces in prayers and songs. 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 could be debated. Rumors have been circulating that the world will end in the year 2000. Some say that the pilgrimage with the ark is God's "last mercy." One person commented, "I think

**Some of the 10,000 people  
walking in procession through Wabag**

the Bible is circulating around to say goodbye to the people." One very popular song expresses it in a poetic way:

*At the end of the pandanus season  
the last pandanus nuts are more tasty.  
Similarly, God's Word is sweet  
because it is near the end.*

Pastoral workers in the diocese are having to face these millenarian issues and to help people see faith commitment as relevant to the reality of their daily lives.

### A New Covenant

According to the book of Deuteronomy (Dt 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 (Dt 14:2) and therefore possessed a right to the promised land. When the Hebrews settled in Canaan, the ark came to be honored 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 summarized 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 a 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. 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. By shaking hands under the ark with the Bible they were rebuilding a new bridge across the river, not with steel or timber, but through reconciliation based on faith in the Word. Events such as this illustrate the influence of the new covenant as people seek to heal the ravages of war and violence.

### **Transforming the Desert**

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 (Jr 31:31-34). Some types of spirituality are oriented towards escaping from the problems of earthly existence. The alternative is to emphasize that salvation is to be found with Christ present at the heart of human history. The Old Testament used the term *shalom* to refer to a state in which one is whole and complete, reconciled with oneself and one's neighbors. This is the sort of *gutpela sitdaun* that is being promoted by the Church in the Enga Province. Jesus' incarnation and his life, death and resurrection are particularly relevant to people who are struggling in the face of violence and death. The *Good News*, then, is a way of life.

Perhaps the most important insight is to realize that in a certain sense the mission of the ark in Papua New Guinea 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. Through actualizing 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" (Is 43:20-21). Perhaps Engan 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. God's Word confronts situations in which people suffer, thus, as followers of Christ, they have a mission to work for justice and peace, and towards the transformation of our world.

These developments have been encouraging for the missionaries still working in the Enga Province. The local people, in their enthusiastic reception of the Word, demonstrate how the *Good News* has indeed taken root, and that the efforts of the early Divine Word Missionaries has borne fruit. They are now looking forward to the way the story of salvation will unfold in the next fifty years! □