

Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

Richard of St. Victor, The Ark of the Covenant as an Allegory for Contemplation

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IN THE 12th century the Abbey of St. Victor outside Paris was a major teaching center. One dominant interest there was to develop a science of contemplation, drawing on such sources as St. Augustine, the Benedictine monastic tradition, and Pseudo-Dionysius. Allegorical interpretation of Scripture reached an advanced level. Richard of St. Victor (1110?–1173), for example, wrote a treatise on contemplation in the form of an exegesis of the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus 25. This is variously called *Benjamin Major*, *The Mystical Ark*, and *The Grace of Contemplation*. His writings profoundly affected subsequent Christian mysticism, including St. Bonaventure, the Rhineland mystics, and Spanish mysticism.

The Mystical Ark is a *tour de force* of psychological allegorical interpretation, as is also Richards' related work, *The Twelve Patriarchs* (*Benjamin Minor*). The subject is the meaning of the Ark of the Covenant. For Richard, the *covenant* means a life of Christian perfection — what Underhill and others call the *unitive life*. In this condition the soul is so completely united with God that it constantly seeks, learns, and follows God's will in a life of Christian wisdom and harmony; one principle way this harmony is expressed is in charity towards others. The *ark* is the sanctified soul, which must be prepared to receive and house, as it were, the covenant by means of the practice of *contemplation*. Hence the work is concerned with the construction of the soul-ark by contemplation. *The Twelve Patriarchs* describes the development of moral and intellectual virtue which must precede the work of contemplation.

For Richard, contemplation (*contemplatio*) is the highest of three ascending forms of cognitive activity, the others being undirected or aimless thinking (*cogitatio*; our usual state of mentation), and directed thought or meditation (*meditatio*). Contemplation is understood in a general way as the relaxed gaze of the mind in wonder and admiration, sustained yet dynamic (see his excellent [analogy to a bird's flight here](#)).

Contemplation itself has six ascending levels, divided into groups of two. The three groups correspond to the realms of the material world and senses (contemplation of the natural world), the realm of the human mind/soul, and of the divine mysteries of God's Essence and the Trinity. A later post will describe the six levels of contemplation in more detail. These are of considerable interest for their own sake, and also in that they influenced the six-stage ascent to God described by St. Bonaventure in his *Journey of the Soul to God*, as well as the [nine-tiered mental hierarchy](#) of fellow Victorine, Thomas Gallus.

At the end of *The Mystical Ark*, Richard supplied a helpful recapitulation of the entire work, including a summary of Ark symbolism, shown in part below. For now, let this serve as a foretaste of his powers of allegorical interpretation. This section helps one see how he approaches symbols, but does not adequately convey his engaging prose style and mastery of organization. Readers are in any case referred to Zinn's accessible English translation and Introduction.

By the tabernacle of the covenant we understand the state of perfection.
Where perfection of the soul is, there also is the habitation of God.
The more the mind approaches perfection, the more closely it is joined in a covenant with God.
However, the tabernacle itself ought to have an atrium around about it.
By atrium we understand discipline of the body; by tabernacle we understand discipline of the mind.

...

No person knows what belongs to the inner person except the spirit of humanity that is in him.
The habitus of the inner person is divided into a rational and an intellectual habitus.
The rational habitus is understood by the exterior tabernacle, but the intellectual habitus is understood by the interior tabernacle.

We call the rational sense that by which we discern the things of ourself;
In this place we call the intellectual sense that by which we are raised up to the speculation of divine things. ...

A person enters into the first tabernacle when he returns to himself.

A person enters into the second tabernacle when he goes beyond himself.

When going beyond himself surely a person is elevated to God.

A person remains in the first tabernacle by consideration of himself; in the second, by contemplation of God. ...

In the atrium of the tabernacle was the altar of burnt offering.

In the first tabernacle were the candelabrum, the table, and the altar of incense.

In the interior tabernacle was the Ark of the Covenant.

The exterior altar is affliction of the body; the interior altar is contrition of the mind.

The candelabrum is the grace of discretion; the table is the teaching of sacred reading.

By the Ark of the Covenant we understand the grace of contemplation.

On the exterior altar the bodies of animals were burned up; by affliction of the body carnal longings are annihilated.

On the interior altar aromatic smoke was offered to the Lord; by contrition of heart the flame of celestial longings is kindled.

A candelabrum is a holder for lights; discretion is the lamp of the inner person.

On the table bread is placed; by it those who are hungry may be refreshed.

However sacred reading certainly is the refreshment of the soul.

An ark is a secret place for gold and silver; the grace of contemplation lays hold of the treasury of celestial wisdom.

Good working pertains to the exterior altar.

Zealous meditation pertains to the candelabrum.

Sacred reading pertains to the table.

Devoted prayer pertains to the interior altar.

(Source: Zinn)

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