

Mary at the Mercy Seat

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But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.

John 20:11-12

The Mary in the title and in the Scripture quoted above is Mary Magdalene. Mark and Luke identify her as a woman out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2). If you know something about the mercy seat, you might know that it was something in the tabernacle, and later in the temple after it was built. Not only that, but it was inside the Holy of Holies or Most Holy Place where only the high priest could go and that only once a year (Hebrews 9:7; Leviticus 16). So why do I in my title place Mary at the mercy seat?

A Description of the Mercy Seat

In Exodus 25:17-21, God gives Moses instructions concerning how the mercy seat is to be made. These verses give us a good description of the mercy seat.

And thou shalt make a mercy seat of pure gold: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof. And thou shalt make two cherubims of gold, of beaten work shalt thou make them, in the two ends of the mercy seat. And make one cherub on the one end, and the other cherub on the other end: even of the mercy seat shall ye make the cherubims on the two ends thereof. And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be. And thou shalt put the mercy seat above upon the ark; and in the ark thou shalt put the testimony that I shall give thee.

Briefly, then, the ark of the covenant was a special container in which was what this passage in Exodus calls the "testimony." We know from other Scriptures that this "testimony" was the two tables of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written (1 Kings 8:9; Deuteronomy 10). These tables of stone—the Ten Commandments—

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were central to the Old Covenant that God made with the children of Israel (Deuteronomy 9:9-11). Thus, the ark containing the tables of the covenant is called the ark of the covenant (Deuteronomy 31:26). Also, in or beside the ark (there is a question over what the exact position was) was "the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded" (Hebrews 9:4).

The covering of the ark is the mercy seat. As the passage from Exodus 25 quoted above describes, the mercy seat had two cherubims or angels, one on each side of the seat with their faces always toward the mercy seat.

In Leviticus 16:15, God instructs that, once a year on the day of atonement, the high priest is to "kill the goat of the sin offering, that is for the people, and bring his blood within the veil, and do with that blood as he did with the blood of the bullock, and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat, and before the mercy seat." Keep in mind the mercy seat, the cherubims, the pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded. I will mention them again.

Mary...Seeth Two Angels

Now, let's take another look at John 20. The passage quoted at the beginning of the article starts with verse 11, so I'll give some context leading up to it. Mary Magdalene (and the other women) go to Jesus' tomb very early on the first day of the week. They see that the stone that covered the opening was rolled away. Mary (and the other women) run and tell Simon Peter and John (referred to as "the other disciple whom Jesus loved") that someone has taken Jesus' body. Peter and John run to the tomb. John arrives first, stoops down outside the tomb, looks and sees (*blepoi*—see) the linen bandages that had been used to wrap Jesus' body, but waits to go in. Peter arrives after John, and he goes straight into the tomb. He sees and considers (*theōrei*—see and mentally consider) the linen wrappings and the handkerchief that was used to wrap Jesus' head encoiled separately. Then John goes in, he sees and perceives (*eiden*—see and perceive) what has happened, and he believes. Then Peter and John leave. Interestingly, God chose not to reveal the angels to them.

But, Mary had followed them back to the tomb, so, as we now see in verse 11, she is left standing outside weeping aloud. She now stoops down into the tomb (the words "and looked" in the King James Version do not correspond to any Greek words in this verse). In the tomb, she sees and considers (*theōrei*) two angels sitting, "the one at the head,

and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain." Two angels, one at each side, is the arrangement of the mercy seat.

The *Hilastērion*

Hebrews 9:5 is a New Testament reference to the mercy seat. It says, "And over it [the ark with the Ten Commandments—the tables of the Old Covenant—inside] the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat; of which we cannot now speak particularly." The word translated "mercy seat" in this verse is *hilastērion*. This word is also found in Romans 3:25, where it is translated "propitiation." Let's look at Romans 3:24-25: "Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation [*hilastērion*] through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God." From these verses, it is clear that the *hilastērion* is Jesus Christ. *Young's Literal Translation* translates these verses this way: "Being declared righteous freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God did set forth a mercy seat [*hilastērion*], through the faith in his blood, for the shewing forth of His righteousness, because of the passing over of the bygone sins in the forbearance of God."

With this information, I believe it is safe to say that the mercy seat was a picture of the sacrificed Jesus Christ, the propitiation for the sins of His people. Jesus Christ was the true mercy seat. Now, let's put this together with John 20.

The True Mercy Seat

I believe that Jesus Christ was our true mercy seat, the reality that the mercy seat in the temple only pictured. I also believe that to help us understand this, God had what Mary saw recorded in John 20. She saw the two angels, one at either end of where Jesus' body had lain. These heavenly messengers were what were pictured by the cherubim on either side of the mercy seat in the temple.

But, you might say, when Mary saw these angels, Jesus' body was gone because He had been resurrected. If He was the mercy seat, the mercy seat was gone when Mary looked. Yes, that's true. In the Old Testament, the high priest sprinkled blood on the mercy seat once every year. But, of Jesus Christ, Hebrews 10:10-14 says, "By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and

offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." Jesus was offered once. Then He was raised for our justification (Romans 4:25). He was not to remain a dead mercy seat; He was to become our living throne of grace in heaven.

Some Other Pictures of Jesus

Jesus had come to fulfill all of the Old Testament types and shadows that had pointed to Him. For example, when He was sacrificed on the Cross, He fulfilled the picture of the Passover lamb sacrificed for us (1 Corinthians 5:7). But He didn't stay on the Cross. Lying in the tomb with the angels watching over His body, Jesus fulfilled the picture of the mercy seat. But He couldn't stay in the tomb. What God was showing in John 20 by having Mary see the angels at the head and foot of where Jesus had lain was that Jesus had fulfilled the picture of the mercy seat. But, the picture fulfilled, He was gone. He is now our Living Mercy Seat in heaven: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Here are some other things that it is helpful to notice. Exodus 16:32-34 says that Moses laid up the pot of manna "before the Testimony." We know from other Scriptures that the testimony was the two tables of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. Numbers 17:10 also says that Moses put Aaron's rod that budded before the testimony. The exact position of these items (whether inside the ark or beside it) is hard to determine, but it is important to see that they were set before the two tables of the law, the Ten Commandments.

Romans 7:9 says, "For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." This idea that the law brings sin and death is found again in 1 Corinthians 15:56: "The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law." Romans 6:23 says the same thing but also gives us hope: "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Although Jesus Christ was manifestly revealed in the New Testament, He is not missing from the Old Testament for those who will see Him. We have seen that He was pictured by the Mercy Seat that, significantly, covered the law. And, He is also pictured by the pot of manna and Aaron's rod that budded that were placed before the law.

Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world" (John 6:32-33). Jesus Christ is the true manna that the manna in the wilderness and the manna in the pot before the law only symbolized. The Old Testament manna sustained physical life, but Jesus Christ gives spiritual life. In John 6:35, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst."

And what about Aaron's rod that budded? In the Bible, a rod symbolized authority. It was like a scepter. God showed Pharaoh that Aaron had more authority than Pharaoh's wise men, sorcerers, and magicians when Aaron's rod became a serpent that "swallowed up their rods" (Exodus 7:11-12). God again showed Aaron's superior authority when He had Moses line up the rods of the princes of Israel along with Aaron's rod before the tabernacle (Numbers 17:1-7). "And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded almonds" (Numbers 17:8). The Hebrew word for almonds is based on a word for "waken" because almonds come out of their winter "death" and blossom very early in the spring.

In a prophecy of Jesus Christ, Isaiah 11:1 states, "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." Psalm 110:2 is also about Jesus: "The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies." Notice also Psalm 45:6: "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: the sceptre of thy kingdom is a right sceptre." Isaiah 61:11 prophesies, "For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations." How will this happen? Through the spread of the Gospel of the kingdom of God, which is the rule of Jesus Christ among the nations. Can you see that Aaron's rod that budded symbolized the resurrection of Jesus Christ and all of His saints with Him (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12) and their ruling with Him in the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:10; 2 Timothy 2:12; Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:15; 20:4)?

So, by having in it the body of Jesus Christ, the tomb contained the mercy seat, the pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded. And bud it did when Jesus Christ rose from the dead! But He still had to return

to heaven to sit "down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3).

Why Weepest Thou?

But Mary did not understand this. Picking up the story in John 20:13-14, it begins where the angels say to her, "Woman, why weepest thou?" At a time when she was staring at evidence that should have caused her to rejoice, she was wailing because she didn't understand. "She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus." Mary does not yet know Jesus has been resurrected. She thinks that someone has simply taken His body away. Then Jesus speaks to her, asking her the same question as the angels: "Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away" (verse 15). Mary has now spoken with the resurrected Jesus and still does not know who He is.

Then Jesus speaks her name. "Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master [*didaskale*—Teacher]" (verse 16). Notice what Jesus had said in John 10: "To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers.... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:3-5, 27). When Jesus called Mary by name, she knew her Master's voice and turned toward Him.

John 20:17 can seem perplexing. I think, however, that we can understand it when we understand that Mary did not yet realize that Jesus had not been resurrected to normal, physical life, but was resurrected with a glorified body to return to heaven. She thought that, with Jesus' return to life, things would again be as they had been in His earthly ministry. She was clinging to the former things and not allowing for the next step in the advancement of the kingdom. So, to correct her, "Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not [*mē mou haptou*—"stop clinging to me"]; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God."

Why Mary?

I think that, before we close, we need to see if we can answer why God chose Mary Magdalene, a woman out of whom Jesus had cast seven demons, to see the picture of the mercy seat. Under the Old Covenant, the mercy seat was behind the veil in the Holy of Holies. Only the high priest could enter and only once a year. No one else could enter, certainly not a woman who had been demon possessed. Women in that society were considered inferior to men, and someone who had been demon possessed would have been considered an extreme sinner.

But with the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross, the veil had been rent from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51), the "very great" stone had been rolled aside (Mark 16:4), and the way completely opened. Who better to show the openness to the mercy seat than this woman, who in that society would have been considered the lowest of the low? Who better, just moments later, to be shown the living proof of her forgiveness by becoming the first person to see the risen Jesus Christ (Mark 16:9), the living mercy seat, than this lowly sinner? God knew that Mary's story can be an example for all sinners who can now "come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).