

The Shape of Noah's Ark

Introduction

Was the ark an ark, or a boat? An ark is a chest, and finds its etymology with the Latin arcus, a chest. A boat though has a stern and keel. Since chests are not typically used for water, and since the Hebrew word for Noah's ark (tevah) is different from another, more typical word for "ark" (arohn), it has been thought that Noah's ark was really Noah's boat.

Firstly and most importantly, below is a consideration of the words used for "ark," and where. Note that the basket for baby Moses is also a tevah, and that all other arks are from arohn.

Table 1

Description	Hebrew Bible	Greek Septuagint (LXX)	Greek NT	Hebrew versions of NT
Noah's ark	tevah	kibotos	kibotos	tevah
Baby Moses' ark	tevah	thibis*	----	----
Ark of the Covenant	arohn	kibotos	kibotos	arohn
Decalogue ark (De 10:1-5)	arohn**	kibotos	----	----

* The Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew lexicon adds that it is also transliterated as thebe.

** Arohn is also used for Joseph's coffin at Genesis 50:26. The LXX word used there is soro. The donation chest in 2 Kings 12:9, 10 and 2 Chronicles 24:8, 10, 11 is arohn too. In the LXX, kibotos is used in 2 Kings 12:9, 10; but in 2 Chronicles 24:8, 10, 11, glossokomos, meaning "container," is used.

From Table 1 it is seen that kibotos is used for both tevah and arohn, with the exception of baby Moses' ark. That the LXX translators were right to translate tevah as kibotos can be seen in the Christian Scriptures, where the inspired writers with (Jesus' approval) did the same. This is emphasized with Matthew, who apparently wrote his gospel in both Hebrew and Greek. Thus, the evidence indicates that Matthew personally used kibotos for tevah.

Next, Table 2 shows specifically where the words in question are located in the NT, and what Syriac words the Aramaic Peshitta uses:

Table 2

Tevah and arohn in Aramaic Peshitta NT	
tevah	
Mt 24:28	keola
Lu 17:27	keola
Heb 11:7	qibota
1 Pe 3:20	qibota
arohn	
Heb 9:4	qibota
Re 11:19	qibota

Interestingly, the phonetic equivalent of kibotos, qibota, is used for both tevah and arohn, with another word for "chest or box" being used twice for tevah.

Meanings of words in Table 1:

Table 3

Word	Meaning
tevah	A chest/box, probably an Egyptian loan-word from T-b-t: chest or coffin.
arohn	A chest/box where valuables are stored; or a coffin.
kibotos	A chest/box.
thibis	A wicker basket.

What follows is a consideration of tevah and its uses, and the meaning it signaled in the mind of an ancient.

Tevah

Baby Moses' tevah

The use of thibis for baby Moses' tevah emphasizes the material. Interestingly, this is the only appearance of this word, it is not used for other baskets, only for baby Moses' tevah—plus it sounds similar.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus (as translated by William Whiston) adds:

When they [Moses' parents Amram and Jochebed] had thus determined, they made an ark [plegma (plaited work, wickerwork)] of bulrushes [biblinon (soft pith of the papyrus plant)], after the manner of a cradle [koitidi (box-basket, related to kibotos)], and of a bigness sufficient for an infant to be laid in, without being too straitened [or, confined]: they then daubed it over with slime [asphaltôî (asphalt, pitch)], which would naturally keep out the water from entering between the bulrushes [plegmatôn (plaited work, wickerwork)], and put the infant into it....But Miriam, the child's sister, passed along upon the bank over against him, as her mother had bid her, to see whither the ark [plegma] would be carried. (*Antiquities of the Jews* 2.9.4 §§220-1)

Thus, Josephus described a box-shaped plaited papyrus basket. Further, in 2.9.5 §224, Josephus calls it a "cradle" twice:

Thermuthis was the king's daughter. She was now diverting herself by the banks of the river; and seeing a cradle [plegma, not koitidos] borne along by the current, she sent some that could swim, and bid them bring the cradle [koitida] to her. When those that were sent on this errand came to her with the cradle [koitidos], and she saw the little child, she was greatly in love with it.

Thus, Josephus adds to the biblical description by stressing the shape and weaving pattern.

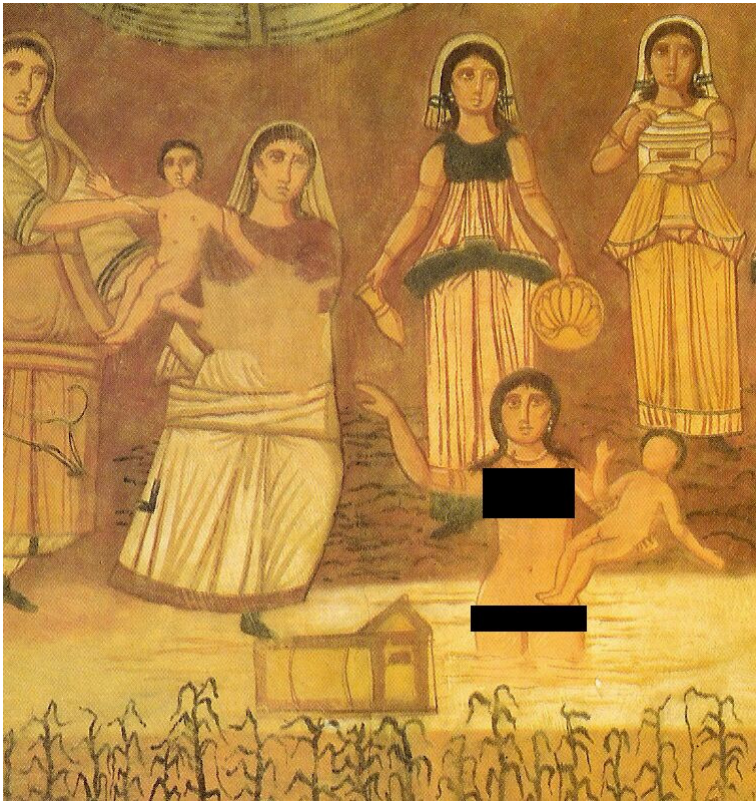
(Greek from: The Perseus Digital Library. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0145&layout=&loc=2.220>. [Whiston's English: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0146&layout=&loc=2.220>])

Based on descriptions by Josephus and Moses, the following illustration was made:



From the cover of My Book of Bible Stories, 2004 ed. Published by Jehovah's Witnesses.

There is also a painting found on a wall of a synagogue in Dura-Europus (300 BC-AD 260), a city of the Roman Empire on the Euphrates River. This Jewish mural reflects Josephus' description above:



Egyptian princess holding Moses, with a chest-shaped basket.
(Moses with his sister and mother at left.)
(Edited)

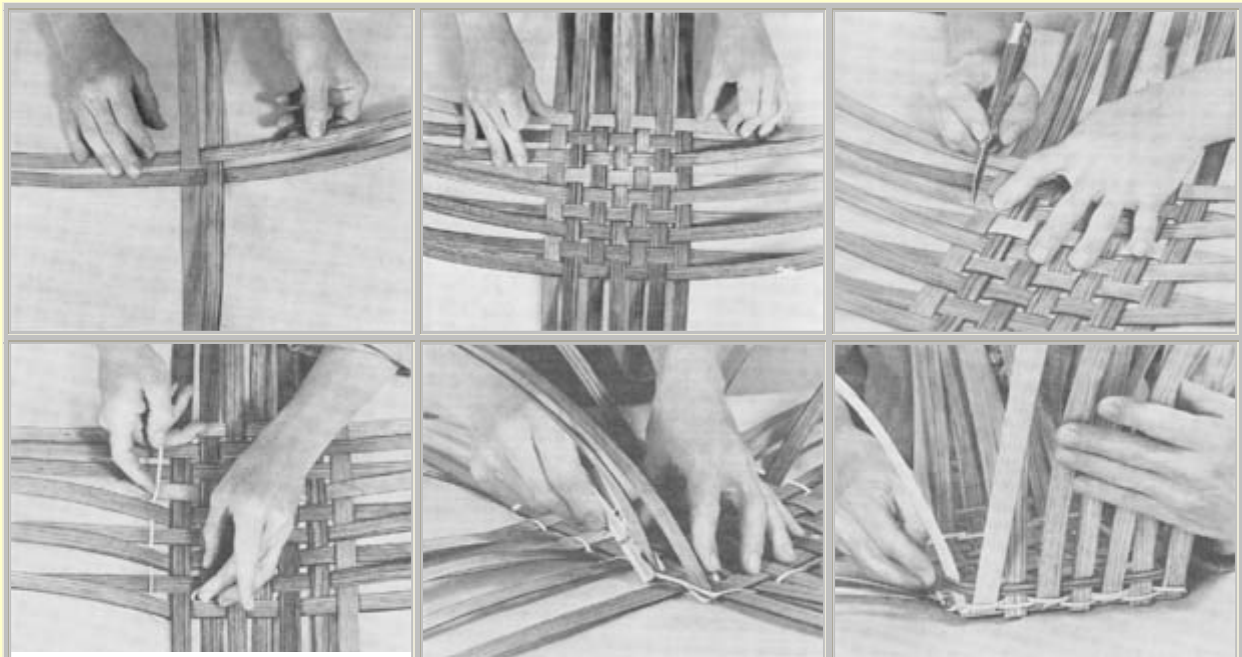


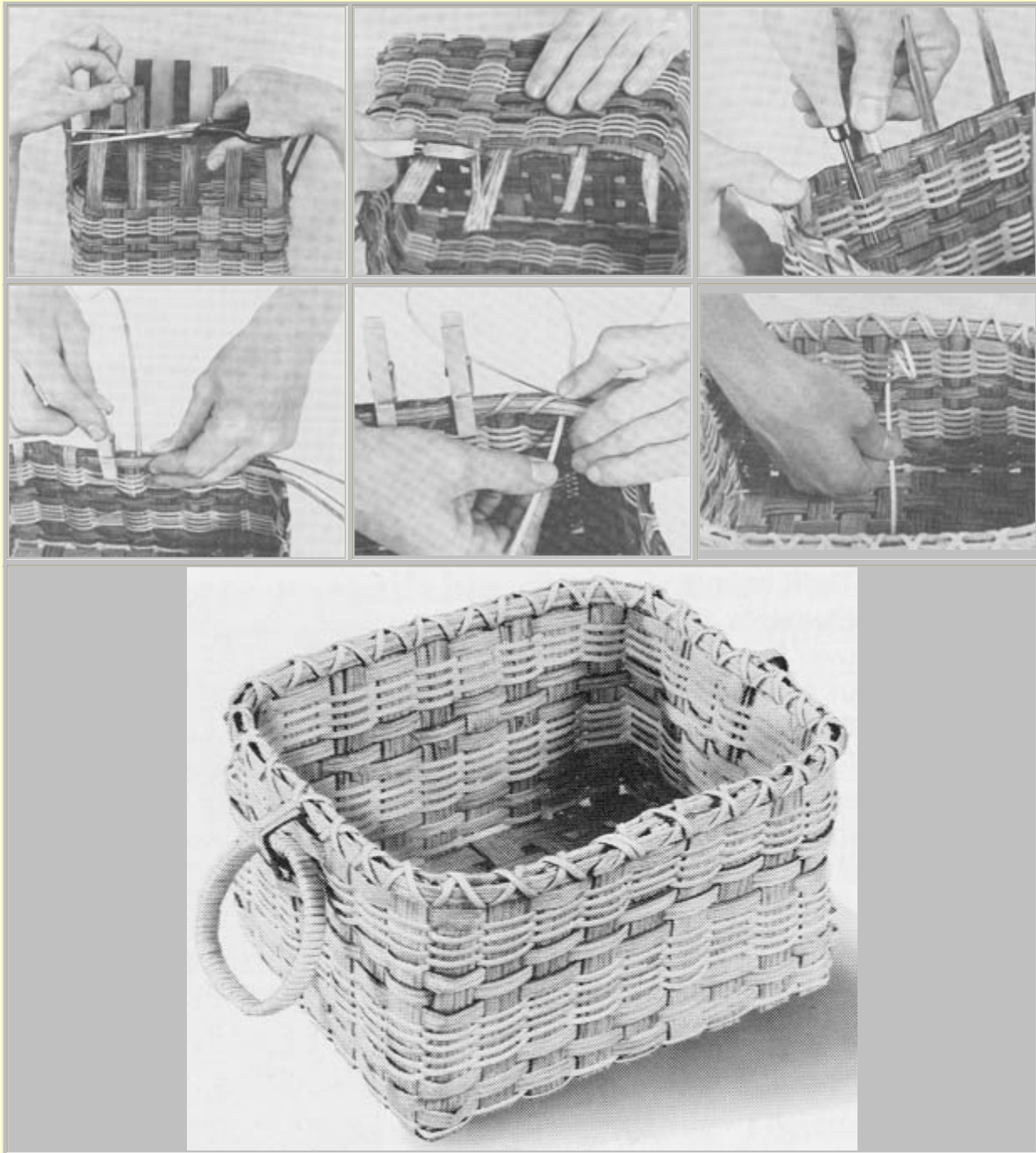
Enlarged view of chest-shaped basket.

McManus, Jason. Editor-in Chief. TimeFrame AD 200-600: Empires Besieged. Time-Life Books. Alexandria, 1989: 25, 27.

How would Jochebed have made such a basket?

The following pictures illustrate how this may have been accomplished in twelve simple steps:





(Pictures from: Basket Weaving. <http://nwmail.washtenaw.cc.mi.us/~cerdly/gdt200/FinalProject/basket.html> [12-27-04])

Egyptian etymology of tevah

It is noted that tevah may derive from the Egyptian t-b-t, “chest or coffin.” Ancient Egyptian coffins included rectangular boxes, as the following picture shows:



“Coffin of Gua. Middle Kingdom from Bersha.” (Egypt Archive. http://www.egyptarchive.co.uk/html/british_museum_22.html [1-10-05])

This is the type of coffin used in a mythological account of Osiris. In Plutarch's Greek version of his death, Set trapped him in a coffin, a “wooden chest,” and pitched it into the Nile! The coffin was called Theba, clearly related to tebah.

(Plutarch, on Isis and Osiris. <http://duke.usask.ca/~niallm/252/Plutarch.htm>; Garnier, J. *The Worship of the Dead*. London, 1904: 46; Higgins, Godfrey. *Anacalypsis*. <http://members.tripod.com/~pc93/anacv1b7.htm> p. 336)

Other examples of Egyptian rectangular box-shaped coffins are seen in the book *Ancient Egypt*, pages 403, 415, and 432 (by Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin. Barnes & Noble Books. 2003).

An example of an Egyptian chest is this:



“A wooden box veneered with ivory. A repeat pattern of the hieroglyphic signs for ‘life’ between a pair of ‘dominion’ signs standing on the sign for ‘all’ runs around all four sides.” (Egypt Archive. http://www.egyptarchive.co.uk/html/cairo_museum_48.html [1-10-05])

Tevah illustrated on a coin

Anamean coin showing the word “Noe” on the Ark.



There is a medal or coin of Apamea in Phrygia, struck as late as the time of [Roman Emperor] Septimius Severus [193-211 AD], in which the Phrygian deluge is commemorated. This medal represents a kind of square vessel floating in the water. Through an opening in it are seen two persons, a man and a woman. Upon the top of this chest or ark is perched a bird, whilst another flies toward it carrying a branch between its feet. Before the vessel are represented the same pair as having just quitted it and got upon the dry land. Singularly enough, too, on some specimens of this medal the letters ΝΩ or ΝΩΕ [Noah in the LXX] have been found on the vessel, as in [the figure above]. (Peloubet, F. N. *Bible Dictionary*. Chicago: The John C. Winston Company, 1925. Page 455.)

Modern map of Greece and Turkey with ancient Apamea shown.



The Jewish Encyclopedia adds under “Apamea”:

City in Phrygia, a country to which Antiochus the Great transplanted many Hebrews (Josephus, “Ant.” xii. 3, § 4). ... According to the Jewish “Sibylline Books” (i. 261), Ararat, where Noah’s ark rested, was in Phrygia... At this place was situated the ancient city of Celenæ, whose inhabitants were compelled by Antiochus Soter to move farther down the river, where they founded the city of Apamea (Strabo, xii. 577). Coins minted in Apamea in the third century bear the effigy of Noah and his wife, together with the word “Noah” (Reinach, “Les Monnaies Juives,” p. 71, Paris, 1887). ... The legend seems to have taken shape from the circumstance that Apamea had the additional name κιβωτος [kibotos] = “ark” (Ramsay, “The Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia,” I. ii. 669-672; Schürer, “Gesch.” 3d ed., iii. 14-16). <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=1628&letter=A>

Thus, the Apamean minting of Noachian motifs, complete with the kibotos ark, has its origin in the Hebrew population—and their “Sibylline Books” that taught that “Ararat, where Noah’s ark rested, was in Phrygia.”

Look at one copy of the actual coin, with zoom and pan power!



<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/image?lookup=1997.03.1494>

Concluding thoughts on tevah

Interestingly, when writing about the vessel he was placed in as a baby, Moses could have used a word for “basket” (sal), that he used elsewhere in his scriptural writings. Instead, he used a word signaling a box-shape. Also, both uses of tevah are for buoyancy. Thus, the scriptural use of tevah differs from arohn in that it specifies a buoyant box. That tevah is a box-shape is demonstrated in the divinely-approved translation of kibotos in the Greek NT.

As Josephus in his Greek *Antiquities of the Jews* used a word related to kibotos, koitidos (koitis) “a box-basket”, for baby Moses’ ark, he used a synonym for kibotos for Noah’s ark: larnax, which is “a coffer, box, chest” (1.3.2 §§77, 78, .5 §§90, 92, etc.). (Greek from: The Perseus Digital Library. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0145:book=1:section=72>) Thus, Josephus corroborates the box-shape meaning for tevah.

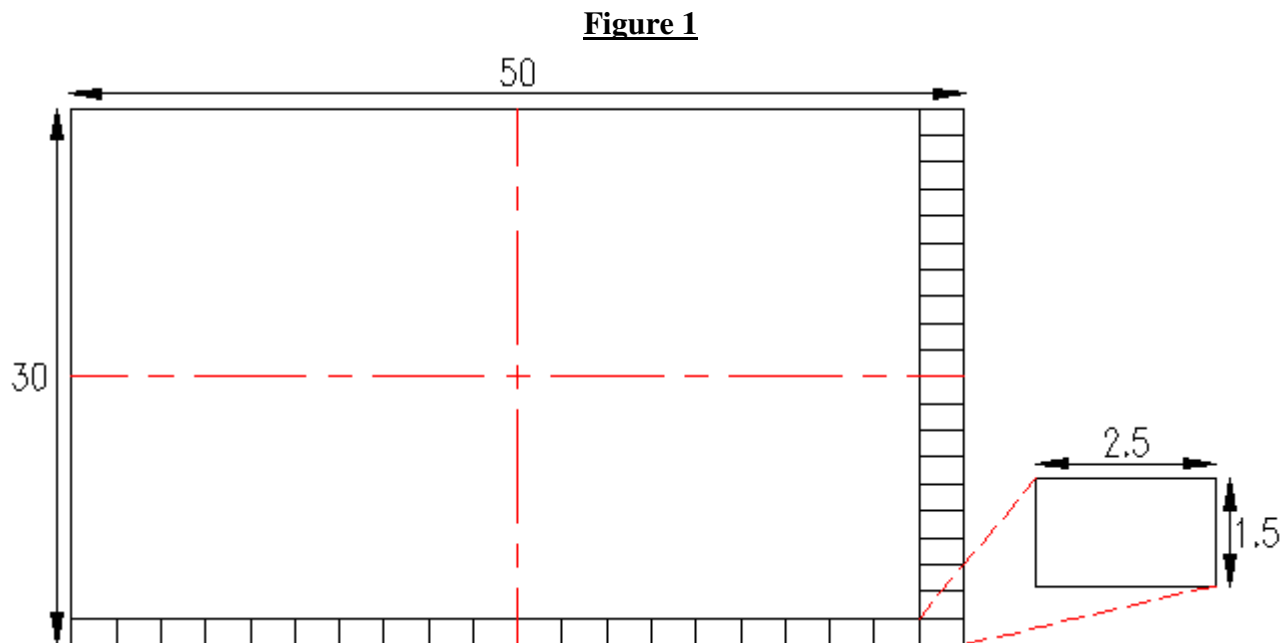
Tevah and arohn

There is an interesting dimensional relationship between Noah's ark and the Ark of the Covenant. According to Genesis 6:15, Noah's ark was 30 x 50 x 300 cubits. And according to Exodus 25:10, the Ark of the Covenant was 1.5 x 2.5 x 1.5 cubits. 30 x 50 and 1.5 x 2.5 correspond to one another, in that:

$$30/10 = 3 = 1.5 \times 2 \text{ and } 50/10 = 5 = 2.5 \times 2$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Twenty times } 1.5 \times 2.5 \text{ is } 30 \times 50 \text{ or} \\ 20(1.5 \times 2.5) = 30 \times 50 \end{aligned}$$

This may be illustrated in that twenty Arks of the Covenant fit perfectly inside Noah's ark both along its height and width:



This would make a row of 400 Arks of the Covenant. ($20 \times 20 = 400$) 200 of these rows perfectly fills Noah's ark's 300 cubit length, producing 80,000 Arks of the Covenant! ($400 \times 200 = 80,000$) The point being, of course, that—dimensionally speaking—the Ark of the Covenant fits perfectly inside Noah's ark, as they are based on the same ratio of 3 to 5. (If the Ark of the Covenant was turned ninety degrees so that its 2.5 cubit length is parallel with Noah's ark's 300 cubit length, it would still fill the 30 and 300 spans, but not the 50—leaving a 0.5 cubit gap.)

This dimensional relationship supports the conclusion that Noah's tevah was box-like, and therefore that tevah signals a box-shape.

Conclusion

Since Noah's tevah-ark was (1) a container whose only functions were to stay afloat while holding cargo, and (2) considering the above dimensional relationship with the Arohn-Ark of the Covenant along with (3) the divinely-approved/inspired translation of kibotos in the Greek NT, it may be concluded that tevah was truly an ark.