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A Comparative Study of the Ark of the Covenant and the Shekhinah in the Old Testament with the Qur'anic Interpretation of the Ark and *Sakīnah*

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Abstract

Jewish religious texts, particularly the Old Testament, frequently reference a sacred and enigmatic object known as the "Ark of the Covenant," which is significant due to its various functions and its close association with the divine presence, the "Shekhinah." According to Yahweh's command, Moses constructed the Ark of the Covenant and placed within it the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, inscribed at Mount Sinai. This study examines the relationship between the "Ark of the Covenant" and the "Shekhinah" in the Old Testament, and the "Ark" and "*Sakīnah*" in the Qur'an and Islamic exegetical tradition, with the aim of clarifying the similarities and differences between these concepts in the two monotheistic traditions. A comparative-analytical method is employed.

The findings indicate that, unlike the Old Testament, the Qur'an does not address the origin or circumstances of the Ark of the Covenant's emergence and refers to it only once, in Surah

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al-Baqarah. While the Ark of the Covenant is associated with the Shekhinah in the Old Testament as a locus of divine presence, the Qur'an explicitly connects the *Sakīnah* with the Ark. However, Qur'anic *Sakīnah* primarily signifies dignity, tranquility, and reassurance bestowed by God upon Moses, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and the believers during moments of battle. It manifests God's majestic and awe-inspiring aspect rather than His beauty-oriented, aspect. In contrast, the Shekhinah in the Old Testament, beyond providing consolation and tranquility, also fulfills roles such as guidance and punishment.

Keywords: Ark of the Covenant, Shekhinah, *Sakīnah*, Divine Presence, Old Testament, Qur'an.

Statement of the Problem

Concepts associated with the presence of the sacred and its material or spiritual manifestations constitute fundamental elements in the theological structures of monotheistic religions. In the Jewish tradition, the "Ark of the Covenant" and the "Shekhinah," each at a different level, are associated with the question of divine presence and God's relationship with the Children of Israel. The Ark of the Covenant, as a sacred object bearing the signs of the divine covenant, appears in the narratives of the Old Testament within the historical context of the Israelites' religious life. The Shekhinah, meanwhile, particularly in Jewish rabbinic and exegetical literature, has been conceptualized as divine presence and dwelling. Therefore, examining the relationship between these two concepts requires simultaneous attention to their textual status, religious functions, and historical development.

In the Qur'an, the "Ark" and "*Sakīnah*" are also presented in relation to the narrative of the Children of Israel and as signs of divine confirmation. Verse 248 of Surah *al-Baqarah* links the Ark with the *Sakīnah,* presenting it as a

divine sign during Saul's appointment. However, the Qur'anic account of the Ark is concise and emphasizes its semiotic and theological function, in contrast to the detailed narratives of the Old Testament. Additionally, "*Sakīnah*" appears in multiple Qur'anic contexts, and its meaning cannot be equated with the concept of divine presence in the Jewish tradition without considering the specific contexts of the relevant verses and distinguishing among its various Qur'anic usages. Therefore, any comparison between these concepts must avoid conceptual conflation and account for differences in their textual and theological contexts.

The central problem addressed in this study is whether an empirically demonstrable conceptual and functional correspondence exists between the Ark of the Covenant and the Shekhinah in the Jewish tradition, and the Ark and *Sakīnah* in the Qur'an and Islamic exegetical tradition. If such a relationship exists, the study seeks to identify the components by which the similarities and differences between these two pairs of concepts can be explained.

This question is significant because apparent similarities between religious concepts do not necessarily indicate semantic or theological identity. For instance, the Shekhinah, a prominent term in rabbinic literature, is not historically or conceptually identical to broader notions of divine presence or glory in the Old Testament. Similarly, Qur'anic *Sakīnah* cannot be simply regarded as the equivalent of the Shekhinah. Therefore, this comparison is grounded in an analysis of the conceptual and functional relationships among these terms within their respective religious contexts.

The significance and necessity of this study can be articulated from several perspectives. First, the Ark of the Covenant and the Shekhinah are central to Jewish studies, while the Ark and *Sakīnah* are significant in Qur'anic and exegetical scholarship. A systematic comparative study of these concepts can enhance understanding of how the sacred and divine presence are represented in two monotheistic traditions. Second, comparative analysis allows for the distinction between structural similarities and theological differences, thereby avoiding superficial comparisons and simplistic historical identifications. Third, this investigation demonstrates how a sacred object, the concept of divine presence, and the experience of tranquility or reassurance among believers are conceptualized within distinct semantic frameworks in two different religious systems. Considerable attention is given to the introduction of the Ark of the Covenant, its history, ritual functions, and relationship to the divine presence. The concept of the Shekhinah in Jewish theology and rabbinic literature has likewise been examined primarily in terms of divine presence or indwelling. In Islamic studies, meanwhile, the Ark and *Sakīnah* have received greater attention in connection with the interpretation of Verse 248 of Surah *al-Baqarah* and the examination of exegetes' views. Nevertheless, these studies have generally been conducted within the framework of a particular religious tradition. Studies that examine the four concepts, the Ark of the Covenant, the Shekhinah, the Ark, and *Sakīnah*, within a single comparative framework, while carefully distinguishing their textual and historical layers, appear to be relatively limited in number. In particular, in many existing comparisons, the Shekhinah has been directly equated with the general concept of divine presence in the Old Testament. At

the same time, *Sakīnah* has been directly compared with the Shekhinah, without sufficient historical and conceptual analysis.

One of the closest theoretical studies is the article by Fakhkhari et al. (2019 AD/1398 SH), which compares the Shekhinah in the Talmud with the *Sakīnah* in the Qur'an and reaches findings that differ from those of the present study. Accordingly, this study adopts a comparative-analytical approach to address the following questions:

1. What position and functions do the Ark of the Covenant and the Shekhinah have in Jewish texts, particularly within the context of the Old Testament and rabbinic literature?
2. How have the Ark and *Sakīnah* been conceptualized in the Qur'an and Islamic exegetical literature?
3. What are the most important similarities and differences between these two pairs of concepts in the two monotheistic traditions?

The novelty of this study lies in its approach: "Rather than seeking direct equivalents, it analyzes these concepts within their specific textual and theological contexts and compares them along conceptual and functional dimensions."

1. Examination of the Meaning and Concept of the Ark of the Covenant and the Shekhinah in the Old Testament

1.1. The Ark of the Covenant

1.1.1. Lexical and Terminological Examination

The word *Ark* is derived from the Latin word *arca*, meaning "A chest." *Arca* corresponds to two Hebrew words: "Tebhāh (תֵּבָה) and Ărôn (אָרוֹן)." Both

words convey the general meaning of a box or chest; however, they differ in usage and frequency. *Tebhāh* occurs only twice in the Old Testament in the relevant sense: first, for Noah's ark in Genesis 6-9, and second, for the basket in which Moses was placed as an infant in Exodus 2:3, 5. By contrast, *Ărôn* is a much more frequently used term and specifically refers to chests or containers, including the Ark of the Covenant.

The etymological origin of *Tebhāh* is uncertain, and some sources have proposed that it may be a non-native loanword. Such a claim, however, requires more precise support from comparative Semitic linguistic studies and cannot be established conclusively without reference to specialized research in historical and comparative linguistics. The term occurs in reference to Noah's ark (The Bible, 1183, Genesis 6-9) and the papyrus basket in which Moses' mother placed her child and set him afloat on the Nile (Exodus 2:3, 5).

The word *Ărôn*, meanwhile, is used for a variety of chests and containers, including the coffin in which Joseph's body was placed (The Bible, 1183, Genesis 50:26) and a chest or collection box (The Bible, 1183, 2 Kings 12:9). More specifically, the term refers to the sacred object that the ancient Hebrews called the Ark of the Covenant (The Bible, 1183, Deuteronomy 10:8). Thus, *Tebhāh* and *Ărôn* differ not only in their lexical usage and frequency but also in their semantic range and textual contexts.

The English word *Ark*, as used in biblical translation, became associated with the concept of the ark through the Latin *arca*, meaning "Chest" or "Container." In the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, however, two distinct words, *Tebhāh* (תֵּבָה) and Ărôn (אָרוֹן), are used for objects that are commonly represented by the English word *Ark*. Therefore, these two terms cannot simply be regarded

as synonymous equivalents, since they exhibit significant differences in their semantic range, contexts, and frequency of occurrence.

The term *Tebhāh* is used in the Old Testament in two principal contexts. First, it denotes the structure in which Noah was placed in the Flood narrative (The Bible, 1183, Genesis 6-9); second, it refers to the container in which Moses' mother placed her infant son before entrusting him to the Nile (The Bible, 1183, Exodus 2:3, 5). Regarding the etymology of this term, there is no single definitive view, and some sources have proposed a possible foreign origin. Therefore, without reference to specialized studies in historical and comparative linguistics, it cannot conclusively be characterized as a "Loanword."

By contrast, the term Ărôn is more widely used in the Old Testament. It refers to various types of chests and containers, including the coffin or chest associated with Joseph's body (The Bible, 1183, Genesis 50:26) and a chest used for offerings or financial contributions (The Bible, 1183, 2 Kings 12:9). In its specialized usage, the term also denotes the sacred object known in Jewish tradition as the "Ark of the Covenant." (The Bible, 1183, Deuteronomy 10:8) Accordingly, the distinction between *Tebhāh* and *Ărôn* can be observed not only at the lexical level but also in their semantic range and religious and narrative contexts.

The complete Hebrew designation for the "Ark of the Covenant" is אֲרוֹן הַבְּרִית (*Ărôn ha-Berit*). The object is also referred to in various sources as the "Ark of Yahweh" and the "Ark of God," designations that likewise indicate its association with the divine and its distinctive position within the religious

system of the Children of Israel (Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions, 2006: 76; Porter, 1996: 70; Kennedy, 1909: 49; Brandon, 1970: 99).

The Designations of the Ark in the Old Testament

The expression *Ark of the Covenant*, or *Ărôn*, occurs dozens of times, and, according to some counts, more than two hundred times, in the Old Testament. In books such as Samuel and other prophetic narratives, it is predominantly referred to as the "Ark of Yahweh," which is undoubtedly among its earliest designations. In Deuteronomy and in works influenced by its theological tradition, the designation "Ark of the Covenant" is more commonly employed. Priestly texts and other later writings likewise use related terminology for the Ark (Kennedy, 1909: 49).

1.2. The Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament

1.2.1. The History of the Ark

The Ark of the Covenant, the sacred object constructed at Yahweh's command to preserve the tablets of the Ten Commandments (Smith, 1884: 57), occupies a unique position among the Children of Israel in the biblical narrative. According to Exodus 37, although the command to construct it was given to Moses, its actual construction was carried out by Bezalel.

Nevertheless, the Ark was not merely a container for the tablets. According to some sources, other sacred objects, such as a vessel containing manna, Aaron's staff, and later the Torah scrolls, were also placed in or associated with it. However, the relevant accounts are not entirely precise and are sometimes contradictory. For example, 1 Kings 8:9 explicitly states that only the two stone tablets were inside the Ark (Porter, 1996: 70; Smith, 1884: 57). The primary significance of the Ark, beyond its function as a repository for sacred objects, lay in its profound association with the divine presence, or

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Shekhinah. The Ark was regarded as a symbol of Yahweh's presence, with Yahweh described as dwelling or manifesting Himself above the cherubim (Kennedy, 1909: 49). Moreover, the Ark played a decisive role in guiding the people toward the Promised Land and in various military contexts. Its presence among the people served as a source of psychological support and courage in confronting their enemies, and military victories were closely associated with its presence (Porter, 1996: 70; Kennedy, 1909: 49; Karesh & Hurvitz, 2006: 32).

Another function attributed to the Ark was facilitating communication with Yahweh. According to the biblical text, God spoke to Moses from among the cherubim, above the mercy seat. In this sense, the Ark should be understood as a sign and sacred locus of divine communication, rather than as an instrument through which speech itself was transmitted (Porter, 1996: 70).

These characteristics demonstrate the exalted position of the Ark within the narrative and ritual structure of the Israelite community. In addition, the Tabernacle, during the years of wandering, served as the temporary location in which the Ark was kept (Atkinson, 2004: 30; Cohn Sherbok, 2005: 10; Neusner & Avery-Peck, 2004: 9; Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions, 2006: 76).

Nevertheless, what adds to the mystery surrounding the Ark's history is its unknown fate. Scholarly sources generally agree that the ultimate fate of the Ark remains unknown. Various hypotheses have been proposed, including its concealment by the prophet Jeremiah, its transfer to Egypt or Ethiopia, and its destruction during the destruction of the Temple, it's plundering, or its

concealment in an unknown location (Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions, 2006: 76; Neusner & Avery-Peck, 2004: 9).

Some scholars consider the destruction of the Ark during the Temple's destruction in 586 BCE a plausible possibility (Cohn Sherbok, 2005: 10), while others emphasize the possibility that it was plundered (Porter, 1996: 70). What can be stated with certainty, however, is that the Ark was not present in the Second Temple (Smith, 1884: 57).

1.2.2. Physical Description and Contents According to the Bible

The details of the construction of the Ark are described extensively in Exodus 25:10-22: "They shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, one and a half cubits wide, and one and a half cubits high. You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and out, and make a gold molding around it."

According to this account, the Ark was made of the durable wood of the acacia tree (*shittim*), and both its interior and exterior were covered with pure gold. Its dimensions were approximately 131 centimeters in length and about 78 centimeters in width and height. However, the conversion to modern units is approximate due to uncertainty about the precise length of the ancient Hebrew cubit.

The cover, known as the Mercy Seat, was a slab of pure gold placed atop the Ark. Two cherubim with outstretched wings and faces turned toward one another were positioned upon it. God spoke with Moses from above the Mercy Seat and from between the two cherubim. Four gold rings were also attached to the four corners of the Ark, and the priests used two gold-plated wooden poles to carry it so that it would never be touched directly.

1.2.3. Characteristics of the Ark in the Books of the Old Testament

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In the Old Testament texts, the Ark is presented as a tangible manifestation or symbol of the divine presence and as the repository of the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. Moses was commanded to construct an ark from acacia wood and cover it with gold. Its precise dimensions are given in Exodus 25:10-22, although their conversion to modern units is approximate due to differences in the interpretation of the Hebrew cubit.

Deuteronomy 10:1-5 briefly refers to this command and to the placement of the tablets inside the Ark:

"At that time the Lord said to me, "Cut out two tablets of stone like the first ones and come up to me on the mountain, and make a wooden ark for yourself … So I made an ark of acacia wood … and I placed the tablets in the ark I had made."

A distinction should be made between the detailed account in Exodus and the more concise narrative reference in Deuteronomy. From this perspective, the Ark was not merely a container for the tablets; within the narrative structure of the Old Testament, it was also associated with the divine covenant and the preservation of the material sign of the Law. The structure and components of the Ark, including the Mercy Seat and the cherubim, are described in detail in Exodus 37:1-9. The designation "Ark of the Covenant" derives from the presence of the Ten Commandments within it, which represented the substance of the divine covenant with the people. This designation may also be understood within the broader framework of the covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites.

According to the biblical accounts, Aaron's staff was also placed alongside the tablets in or in association with the Ark (Exodus 40:20; Hebrews 9:4). The

Ark was kept in the Tabernacle of the Congregation, within the Holy of Holies and behind the veil, and access to it was subject to strict ritual restrictions. Leviticus 16:2 prohibits Aaron from entering this sacred space without the prescribed rituals. These restrictions demonstrate the sanctity of the space and the highly regulated ritual order surrounding the Ark.

Furthermore, according to Numbers 4:15, during periods of travel, Aaron and his sons were required to cover the sacred objects, after which the sons of Kohath were to carry them without touching them. Otherwise, the offender would face death. The prohibition against touching the Ark is further emphasized in the account of Uzzah, whose touching of the Ark was followed by divine anger and his death (1 Chronicles 13:10). Thus, the danger associated with contact with the Ark should not necessarily be understood as arising from some mysterious inherent power; rather, it is presented in the narrative as a consequence of violating the boundaries and sanctity of the sacred, accompanied by divine punishment.

The Ark was also regarded as a means of communication with Yahweh and of receiving His voice. According to Numbers 7:89, Moses heard the voice of God from above the Mercy Seat and from between the two cherubim. Exodus 25:22 likewise emphasizes that God would speak with Moses from above the Mercy Seat. These verses portray the Ark not as an independent medium of speech, but as a sacred space or locus of divine manifestation and communication.

The expressions used in the Old Testament indicate that the Ark was a locus of divine presence and protection. This presence, however, should not be understood as the physical indwelling of God’s essence within the Ark. Rather, within Old Testament theology, distinctions must be made among

concepts such as divine glory, presence, and dwelling. The account of the Israelites' journey in Numbers 10:33-36 reflects this understanding: the Ark traveled before the people, while Moses' prayer at its departure and arrival expressed divine companionship and guidance. From this perspective, the Ark was a ritual and narrative sign of God's presence and providential care, rather than His material dwelling place.

According to Deuteronomy 10:8, the tribe of Levi was designated to carry the Ark. Other accounts, however, indicate that this responsibility was specifically entrusted to the Kohathite clan of the tribe of Levi (Numbers 4:4-15). In some narratives, the priests also played a role in carrying the Ark (Joshua 3:3-6; 1 Kings 8:3-6). Thus, although the carrying of the Ark was assigned within the ritual organization to the tribe of Levi, in practice, depending on the period and circumstances, it was entrusted to particular groups of Levites, especially the Kohathites, as well as to the priests.

Despite the great reverence and strict protection surrounding the Ark, it was captured by the Philistines during a battle. The Philistines were subsequently compelled to return it because of the calamities that befell them (1 Samuel 5:1-12; 6:1-19; 2 Samuel 6:1-17). Later, Solomon, fulfilling his father David's aspiration, built a Temple for the Ark in Jerusalem and placed it in the Holy of Holies (1 Kings 8:1-6; Sweeney, 2002-2003: 22–27; Stefon, 2012: 13-14; Cohn-Sherbok, 2003: 484). Following the destruction of the Temple, however, no reliable information concerning the fate of the Ark remains, and only various hypotheses have been proposed regarding its ultimate destiny.

2. The Presence of God or the "Shekhinah" in the Old Testament

Shekhinah is a Hebrew term derived from the root (*sh-kh-n*), meaning "To dwell" or "To reside," and in technical usage refers to the presence of God (Cohn Sherbok, 2005: 135; Neusner & Avery-Peck, 2004: 145; Benner, 2007: 60-61). The Shekhinah was originally understood as a material or worldly manifestation of Yahweh for the people and their leaders (Neusner & Avery-Peck, 2004: 145). This distinctive presence is directly associated with the community and has been described as a light illuminating the world (Cohn Sherbok, 2005: 135; Cohn Sherbok, 2003: 350).

Its Aramaic form was Shekinta (Stefon, 2012: 127), and it should not be regarded as an independent being or entity (Saldrin, 1996: 1009). Jewish scholars in the rabbinic period employed this designation to refer to the presence of God (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003: 350), and the term occurs frequently in works such as the Talmud and Midrash. It was also sometimes used as a respectful circumlocution to avoid directly pronouncing the name of God (Stefon, 2012: 127).

An examination of the concepts associated with the divine presence in the Old Testament demonstrates that the Glory of Yahweh (*Kabod Yahweh*), which descended upon and filled the Tabernacle, is not synonymous with the rabbinic concept of the Shekhinah. Rather, the latter may be understood as a later interpretation and development of the concept of divine glory. For example, Exodus 40:34 states:

"Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." (Stefon, 2012: 127; Saldrin, 1996: 1009)

With the construction of Solomon's Temple, the divine presence came to dwell there; following its destruction, that presence departed from the site. Some rabbinic traditions maintain that after the destruction of the Temple, the

Shekhinah returned to its source, while another tradition holds that it came to dwell at the Western Wall. Rabbinic interpretations also state that the Shekhinah is present in synagogues and houses of Torah study: wherever ten people gather for worship, or wherever an individual engages in the study or teaching of the Torah, the Shekhinah is likewise present (Saldrin, 1996: 1009). Based on the themes of the Tanakh, the characteristics of the divine presence (Shekhinah) may be summarized as follows:

1) A tangible and manifest presence: The divine presence is depicted as an observable reality (Genesis 18:22-23);

2) A source of both consolation and affliction: In addition to providing reassurance, the divine presence may also be associated with calamity and punishment (Genesis 19:24; Numbers 14:37).

3) A medium for communicating with Yahweh and hearing His voice: The divine presence provides the setting for communication with Yahweh (Exodus 6:10-12).

4) Visible to all: The manifestation of the divine presence is not restricted to a select group or chosen individuals (Exodus 16:10).

5) A locus for the offering of sacrifices: Sacrifices are presented in the presence of God (Leviticus 1:3).

6) A guiding and instructive role: The divine presence guides the people, with their movement organized through the appearance and disappearance of the cloud and fire over the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-38).

3. The Presence of God or the "Shekhinah" in the Old Testament

Shekhinah is a Hebrew term derived from the verb shakhan, meaning "To dwell," "To settle," or "To reside in a place," and is used technically to denote

the presence of God (Cohn Sherbok, 2005: 135; Neusner & Avery-Peck, 2004: 145; Benner, 2007: 60-61). The Shekhinah was originally understood as the material and worldly manifestation of Yahweh through which the people and their leaders experienced God (Neusner & Avery-Peck, 2004: 145). It may therefore be understood as a distinctive manifestation of Yahweh for the Israelites, a presence directly associated with the presence of the community and described in terms of a light or radiance that illuminates the world (Cohn Sherbok, 2005: 135; Cohn-Sherbok, 2003: 350).

The designation *Shekhinah* originally appeared in the Aramaic form Shekinta (Stefon, 2012: 127). Nevertheless, the Shekhinah should not be regarded as an independent entity (Saldrin, 1996: 1009). Jewish scholars during the rabbinic period employed this designation to refer to the presence of God, and Shekhinah became a frequently used term in the Talmud, Midrash, and other later Jewish texts (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003: 350; Stefon, 2012: 127). Some texts also employed it as a respectful circumlocution intended to avoid directly mentioning the name of God (Stefon, 2012, p. 127).

In the Old Testament, the "Glory of the Lord," (*Kabod Yahweh*) including the passage describing the filling of the Tabernacle, represents an older, explicitly biblical concept and should not be regarded as entirely synonymous with the rabbinic concept of the Shekhinah. In later Jewish literature, the Shekhinah represents an interpretation and elaboration of the concept of divine glory rather than its precise equivalent. Drawing upon verses such as "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle," (Exodus 40:34) the rabbis developed and articulated the concept of the Shekhinah, whereas the Old Testament itself does not employ the term "Shekhinah." (Stefon, 2012: 127; Saldrin, 1996: 1009)

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With the construction of Solomon's Temple, the presence of God came to dwell there, and following the destruction of the Temple, it departed from that place.

Some rabbinic traditions indicate that the Shekhinah returned to its source following the destruction of the Temple, while others speak of its dwelling at the Western Wall (Wailing Wall). The latter view is not a consensus position but rather represents one among several rabbinic traditions concerning the fate of the Shekhinah after the destruction of the Temple.

Some rabbinic interpretations also maintain that, after the destruction of the Temple, the Shekhinah remained present in synagogues and houses devoted to the reading and study of the Torah. Accordingly, it is stated that wherever at least ten people gather for worship, or wherever an individual engages in the teaching of the Torah, the Shekhinah is likewise present (Saldrin, 1996: 1009).

An examination of the themes of the verses of the Tanakh allows the characteristics of the Shekhinah, or divine presence, to be summarized as follows:

- A Tangible Rather than Merely Unseen Presence: "And those men turned their faces from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham drew near and said, "Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?" (Genesis 18:22–23)
- Consolation and Punishment: The presence of God is associated not only with reassurance but also with the manifestation of divine punishment and calamity: "Then the Lord rained down burning sulfur

on Sodom and Gomorrah, from the Lord out of the heavens." (Genesis 19:24) Likewise: "So those men who brought up the bad report about the land died by a plague before the Lord." (Numbers 14:37) Thus, divine presence may simultaneously signify divine protection and consolation, while also constituting the context in which divine judgment and punishment are manifested.

- A Medium of Communication with Yahweh: The divine presence constitutes the setting for communication with Yahweh and for hearing His voice: "Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Go and tell Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to let the Israelites go out of his land …" (Exodus 6:10-12)
- Visible to All: The manifestation of the divine presence is not restricted to a select group: "And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the Israelites, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud." (Exodus 16:10; cf. Exodus 18:12; 23:17; 34:23)
- A Place for the Offering of Sacrifice: Sacrifices are offered before the presence of God: "If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord." (Leviticus 1:3; cf. 3:7, 12; 4:4)
- A Guiding and Instructive Role: The people's guidance accompanies the divine presence. The cloud covers the Tabernacle, and the glory of the Lord fills it; the movement or encampment of the people depends upon whether the cloud rises or remains in place: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the

tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out; but if the cloud were not taken up, they would not set out until the day it was taken up." (Exodus 40:34-38)

4. The Representation of the Ark and *Sakīnah* in the Noble Qur'an

Qur'anic exegetes have offered diverse and, at times, conflicting views and reports concerning the Ark and *Sakīnah*. These range from rational and theological analyses grounded in the verses' contexts to transmitted reports derived from Israelite traditions. In the present study, interpretations supported by stronger textual and documentary evidence, or those more consistent with the verses' context and content, are placed at the center of the analysis. Israelite reports, which are generally unsupported by reliable chains of transmission, are cited merely as accounts of an early exegetical tradition rather than as established historical or theological evidence.

This approach strengthens the rigor of the argument while preventing the confusion that can result from the accumulation of parallel reports of unequal evidentiary value.

4.1. The Lexical and Technical Meaning of the Ark in the Qur'an

Various hypotheses have been proposed regarding the meaning and etymology of the term "Ark." Some have understood it as a chest to which its owner continually returns (Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1954 AD/1374 AH: 2, 437). The form "*al-tābūh*" has also been attributed to the spelling used by the *Ansar*, since, according to transmitted reports, there was disagreement between the

Quraysh and the *Ansar* over the orthography of this word: the *Ansar* wrote it with "*hāʾ*," whereas *Ibn Zubayr* and *Saʿīd ibn ʿĀṣ* of *Quraysh* wrote it with the extended "*tāʾ*" (*tāʾ maftūḥah*) (Muṣṭafawī, 1981 AD/1360 SH: 1, 372; Ibn Manẓūr, 1993 AD/1414 AH: 1, 233). *ʿUthmān* subsequently instructed that it be written according to the linguistic convention of *Quraysh* (Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 1, 22; Qurṭubī, n.d.: 1, 55; Suyūṭī, n.d.: 1, 316-317; Qarashī, 1951 AD/1371 AH: 5, 285), since it was believed that the Qur'an had been revealed in the language of *Quraysh* (Qurṭubī, 1944 AD/1364 AH: 1, 55).

The more plausible view is that the term derives from "*Tabāh*" of Hebrew origin and that its meaning is close to that of a chest or container (Muṣṭafawī, 1981 AD/1360 SH: 1, 373; Sadeqi Tehrani, 1986 AD/1365 SH: 19, 193). It has been applied to a small chest, Noah's Ark, and the Ark of the Covenant, and no particular derivational morphology has been proposed for it (Sadeqi Tehrani, 1986 AD/1365 SH: 19, 93; Muṣṭafawī, 1981 AD/1360 SH: 1, 373). Arthur Jeffery and some Orientalists have regarded its origin as Aramaic, whereas others have considered an Ethiopian origin more probable (Jeffery, 1993 AD/1372 SH: 153).

4.2. The Ark in the Qur'an and Hadith Narrations

Verse 248 of Surah *al-Baqarah* is the Qur'an's only explicit reference to the word "Ark." Nevertheless, to understand its function and the events surrounding it, verses 246-251 must also be taken into account. These verses recount the Israelites' request for the appointment of a king, the selection of Saul, their opposition to him on account of his poverty, the presentation of his superiority in knowledge and physical strength, and the introduction of the Ark as a sign of his kingship. In this account, the Ark contains *Sakīnah* and remnants of the family of Moses and Aaron, is carried by angels, and is

subsequently followed by Saul's preparation of the people for battle against Goliath.

According to these verses, Qur'anic exegetes have also stated that, according to the customs prevailing among the Israelites, the prophetic and royal offices were not confined to, or monopolized by, a single family (Sabzevari, 1988 AD/1409 AH: 4, 174; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1954 AD/1374 AH: 2, 297). Accordingly, they asked their prophet to appoint a king for them (Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1994 AD/1415 AH: 1, 375; Baḥrānī, n.d.: 1, 502; Qummī, 1947 AD/1367 AH: 1, 82). The prophet then asked them whether they were prepared to fight Goliath, and they affirmed their readiness. It subsequently became clear that God had chosen Saul as king (Ibn Kathīr, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 2, 6; Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, 2002 AD/1423 AH: 1, 206; Abū Ḥayyān Andalusī, 1999 AD/1420 AH: 2, 559).

The Israelites regarded Saul's poverty as a weakness and considered themselves more deserving of kingship (Shubbar, 1986 AD/1407 AH: 1, 77; Ṭabrisī, 1940 AD/1360 AH: 3, 81). However, Samuel or Jeremiah responded that God had chosen him because of his superior knowledge and physical strength (Baḥrānī, n.d.: 1, 506; Fayḍ Kāshānī, 1994 AD/1415 AH: 1, 275; Ṭabāṭabā'ī, 1954 AD/1374 AH: 2, 297). Samuel told the people that Saul was their king and that the sign of his kingship was the Ark, a sacred Ark that had been absent from among the Israelites for many years, as indicated by the phrase "After Moses" (Javadi Amoli, n.d.: 11, 653). This Ark has been identified as the "Ark of the Covenant" (Marāghī, n.d.: 10, 99; Sadeqi, 1961 AD/1340 SH: 13, 32; Sadeqi Tehrani, 1986 AD/1365 SH: 19, 93; Sayyid Quṭb, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 3, 1636; Ibn Khaldūn, 1943 AD/1363 AH: 1, 441-

442; 2, 102-113, 122) and has also been called the "Ark of Testimony." (Qasemi, n.d.: 2, 181)

At this point, four levels of data must be distinguished. First, there is the account of the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament; second, the terminological elaborations developed by the rabbis in the Talmud and Midrash; third, Islamic reports and exegetical interpretations, many of which were shaped based on Jewish stories; and fourth, Orientalist analyses concerning the linguistic and historical origins of the relevant terms. Accordingly, material cited from Islamic exegetical works should be read within the framework of the Islamic exegetical tradition, rather than as a direct and independently verified account of the Old Testament or of official Jewish theology. Any comparative analysis that combines these levels, therefore, requires that the source of each assertion be explicitly identified.

4.3. *Sakīnah* in the Qur'an and Exegetical Texts

In his "*Wujūh al-Qurʾān*," *Tiflīsī* identifies four general meanings for "*Sukūn*" and its derivatives in the Qur'an:

- Rest and repose: "[He is] the Cleaver of daybreak and has made the night for rest" (al-Anʿām: 96);
- Settling or causing to dwell: "And We will surely cause you to settle in the land after them …" (Ibrāhīm: 14); "And you dwelt in the dwellings of those who wronged themselves …" (Ibrāhīm: 45);
- Finding comfort and companionship: "He is the One who created you from a single soul and made from it its mate so that he might find comfort in her"; that is, "*li yastaʾnisa ilayhā*," "So that he might find companionship and intimacy with her." (al-Aʿrāf: 189);

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- Tranquility of the heart: "Take from their wealth a charity … Indeed, your prayer is a source of tranquility for them …" (al-Tawbah: 103).

He also identifies three meanings for reassurance in "*Wujūh al-Qurʾān*" (p. 23): being at rest (al-Baqarah: 160), becoming content or satisfied (al-Naḥl: 106), and standing (al-Nisāʾ: 103).

The term *Sakīnah* has several meanings in the Qur'an. First, it may signify settlement or descent into a particular place. Second, it may refer to the Spirit of God, an interpretation found primarily in exegetical texts and Jewish stories (Newby, 2002: 189), and mentioned in the Medinan surahs of the Qur'an (Robson, 1970: 551). Third, it denotes tranquility and steadfastness. Arthur Jeffery likewise regards the term as referring to divine or supernatural assistance.

The word *Sakīnah* occurs four times in the Noble Qur'an:

- Al-Baqarah: 248, in connection with the Ark;
- Al-Tawbah: 26: "Then Allah sent down His tranquility upon His Messenger and upon the believers …" in the context of the Battle of *Ḥunayn*;
- Al-Tawbah: 40: "Then Allah sent down His tranquility upon him …" in the context of the Prophet's migration and his presence in the cave;
- Al-Fatḥ: 26: "Then Allah sent down His tranquility upon His Messenger and upon the believers …" in the context of the Treaty of *Ḥudaybiyyah*.

An important point is that in these verses, *Sakīnah* is mentioned in the context of war and the believers' struggle against the disbelievers, or in situations of hardship and distress confronting the Prophet or the believers. Accordingly,

Sakīnah may be understood as inner strength and reassurance resulting from the manifestation of God's power and majesty.

About the relationship between Qur'anic *Sakīnah* and the Hebrew Shekhinah, caution is necessary. Unlike the Ark, whose correspondence with the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament is relatively clear and broadly acknowledged among scholars, the relationship between *Sakīnah* and Shekhinah rests primarily on etymological similarity. Both derive from the Semitic root (*s-k-n*), associated with settling and becoming tranquil, but the two terms cannot readily be regarded as synonymous or directly corresponding concepts. Orientalists such as Newby (2002: 189) and Robson (1970: 551) have primarily pointed to the phonetic similarity between the terms and to the possibility of lexical influence between them within the pre-Islamic religious-cultural context of the Arabian Peninsula, without establishing a definitive conceptual or functional relationship between them.

In Jewish theology, Shekhinah primarily denotes the settled and continuous presence of God in a particular place, such as the Tabernacle, the Temple, or the synagogue. By contrast, Qur'anic *Sakīnah*, at least in the four passages examined here, represents a temporary, event-specific state that descends during moments of warfare or anxiety. This functional difference requires separate investigation and consultation of more specialized sources in comparative religious studies and may constitute an important question for future research.

An examination of the four aforementioned verses reveals the following characteristics of *Sakīnah* in the Qur'an, in comparison with the Shekhinah in the Old Testament:

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- A Descending phenomenon rather than a continuous presence: In all four instances, the verb "*Anzala*" (to send down or to cause to descend) is used, "Allah sent down His *Sakīnah*" (*anzala Allāhu sakīnatahu*), indicating a divine and episodic event rather than a continuous dwelling in a particular place (al-Baqarah: 248; al-Tawbah: 26, 40; al-Fatḥ: 26).
- Descent in times of crisis and distress: All four instances, the battle between Saul and Goliath, the Battle of *Ḥunayn*, the Prophet's migration and his presence in the cave, and the Treaty of *Ḥudaybiyyah*, are associated with anxiety, danger, or conflict. This differs from the presence of God in the Old Testament, which is described in a variety of contexts, including worship and the community's everyday life.
- Strengthening of the heart and inner tranquility: In the Qur'an, *Sakīnah* is primarily associated with the inner stability of the Prophet and the believers rather than with an external and visible phenomenon. This contrasts with the divine presence in the Old Testament, which is described as visible to all and not merely to selected individuals.
- Limited association with a material object: *Sakīnah* is mentioned in association with a material object only in *al-Baqarah*: 248, through its connection with the Ark. In the other three instances (al-Tawbah: 26, 40; al-Fatḥ: 26), it descends directly upon the hearts of the Prophet and the believers. This may suggest that, unlike the rabbinic Shekhinah, which is linked to a particular place or material object such as the Tabernacle, Temple, or Ark, the function of *Sakīnah* in the

Qur'an shifts from dependence on a material object to a spiritual, inward state. Nevertheless, establishing such a historical development requires an independent examination of the chronological order in which these verses were revealed.

- Accompaniment by divine assistance: *Sakīnah* consistently descends alongside other forms of unseen divine assistance, such as the angels carrying the Ark in the story of Saul, and the unseen forces in the Battle of *Ḥunayn* and the Treaty of *Ḥudaybiyyah*. It is therefore part of a broader system of divine assistance and support rather than an independent phenomenon.

Regarding the form of *Sakīnah*, the transmitted reports differ. According to one narration, *Sakīnah* was a human-like figure that spoke from the Ark whenever an event occurred and guided the Israelites toward what was in their best interest. Some have described it as resembling the head of a dead cat; when the Ark was brought forward in battle and a sound resembling the cry of a cat was heard, the Israelites became certain of their victory (Ibn Kathīr Dimashqī, 1998 AD/1419 AH: 1, 508; Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 2, 386; Kashefi Sabzevari, 1990 AD/1369 SH: 83; Maybudī, 1951 AD/1371 AH: 1, 668). Others have described it as having a catlike head and two wings (ʿĀmilī, 1940 AD/1360 AH: 1, 495). In another narration, *Sakīnah* is described as a divine creature characterized by tranquility and mercy, with a catlike head, a tail, two beautiful wings, and a voice. The Ark and the Israelite army would follow it, and wherever the Ark was placed, the army would settle there (Kashefi Sabzevari, 1990 AD/1369 SH: 83). Some have also interpreted *Sakīnah* as a wind (Kulaynī, 1945 AD/1365 AH: 5, 256; Qummī, 1947 AD/1367 AH: 1, 82; Qurṭubī, 1944 AD/1364 AH: 3, 249), while some

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narrations describe it as having a head resembling that of a human being. It has also been said to have been an animal resembling a cat, with two wings, from whose tail and eyes light radiated; when it looked toward the army, it caused the enemy to be defeated (Qurṭubī, 1944 AD/1364 AH: 3, 249).

According to a narration attributed to *Wahb ibn Munabbih, Sakīnah* was the head of a dead cat; when it cried out from within the Ark, the Israelites became certain of their victory (Ṭabarī, 1991 AD/1412 AH: 2, 386; Thaʿlabī, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 2, 613; Ibn ʿAṭiyyah Andalusī, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 1, 333; Ṭabarī, n.d.: 1, 464). *Qurṭubī* likewise regarded *Sakīnah* as a spirit from God who spoke to them and informed them of future events (Qurṭubī, 1944 AD/1364 AH: 3, 249). It is narrated from *Ibn ʿAbbās* that *Sakīnah* was a golden basin in which the hearts of the prophets were washed, and that God granted it to Moses (Ibn ʿAjībah, 1998 AD/1419 AH: 1, 275; Thaʿlabī, 2001 AD/1422 AH: 1, 491). Nevertheless, a more plausible interpretation may be that *Sakīnah* signifies the tranquility and reassurance that arose among the army when the Ark was brought forward, strengthening the believers and contributing to their victory. This interpretation is consistent with the use of concepts such as reassurance, contentment, and reliance upon God in other accounts of warfare as well.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to comparatively examine the relationship between the Ark of the Covenant and the Shekhinah in the Jewish tradition, on the one hand, and between the Ark and *Sakīnah* in the Noble Qur'an and Islamic exegetical literature, on the other. The conceptual and functional

analysis of these four notions demonstrates that, although certain structural similarities exist among them in their association with the sacred, divine signs, and their relationship with the community of believers, these similarities do not imply conceptual or theological identity. The most important finding of the study is that comparing these concepts reveals, rather than establishing direct equivalents between them, fundamental differences in how the concepts of divine presence and providential care are formulated within the two religious traditions.

In the Jewish tradition, the Ark of the Covenant, as described in the Old Testament, is a sacred object associated with the covenant, the Law, and the religious history of the Israelites. In certain narratives, it is also connected with manifestations or signs of divine presence and glory. By contrast, the Shekhinah, as a prominent concept in rabbinic and exegetical literature, represents a particular formulation of divine presence or indwelling. Accordingly, the study's findings indicate that the Shekhinah should not be simplistically or directly equated with every conception of divine presence in the Old Testament. The relationship between the Ark of the Covenant and the Shekhinah is likewise better analyzed within the conceptual network of divine presence and its signs than through the claim that the divine essence literally indwelt the Ark.

In the Noble Qur’an, the Ark is represented with a function different from that found in the broader Old Testament narrative. In surah al-Baqarah: 248, rather than presenting a detailed history of the Ark, the Qur’an places it within the narrative structure concerning the selection of Saul and divine confirmation. Thus, in the Qur’anic account, the significance of the Ark appears to lie less in the history of its origin, construction, or subsequent fate than in its symbolic

and evidentiary function as a sign confirming a divine command. From this perspective, the difference between the two accounts is not merely a difference in the quantity of information provided; rather, it reflects a difference in how the concept of the Ark is employed and formulated in the two religious texts.

The comparison of Shekhinah and *Sakīnah* likewise demonstrates that their most significant similarity lies in their association with the divine and their impact upon the condition of human beings and the religious community. Nevertheless, fundamental differences exist between them in terms of function and semantic scope. In Jewish literature, the Shekhinah operates within a network of concepts involving divine presence, guidance, protection, and, at times, judgment. In the Noble Qur'an, by contrast, *Sakīnah*, in its occurrences concerning its descent upon the Prophet and the believers, primarily denotes tranquility, reassurance, and steadfastness in difficult circumstances. Therefore, the study's findings indicate that *Sakīnah* cannot be regarded simply as the Qur'anic equivalent of Shekhinah; rather, each concept derives its meaning from its own theological and linguistic system.

The overall conclusion of the study is that there is structural correspondence accompanied by semantic and functional differences between the two conceptual pairs examined. In other words, both religious traditions employ concepts to explain the relationship between the divine realm, the community of believers, and their religious experience. Yet, they do not articulate this relationship through identical conceptual frameworks. In the Jewish tradition, the connection between the Ark and signs of divine presence, together with the formulation of the Shekhinah in rabbinic literature, is structured around

the concept of divine presence and indwelling. In the Qur'an, by contrast, the Ark and *Sakīnah* acquire their meaning within the framework of divine signs, confirmation of the divine command, and the generation of tranquility and reassurance among believers.

Accordingly, the principal conclusion of this study is that the similarities among these concepts should be sought at the level of their general religious function and structural role, rather than through conceptual equivalence or direct terminological correspondence.

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