

## THE ARK OF THE COVENANT



2 Samuel 6:12 "So David went and brought up the ark of God . . . to the city of David (to Jerusalem) . . . (And) as the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing (half-naked) before the LORD; and she despised him in her heart."

In last week's reading from the Old Testament, Good King David was anointed King over both Israel and Judah, after the death of Saul's only surviving son, Ishbaal, who was killed by his own aides who thought it would please David. Now in today's reading, King David brings the famed Ark of the Covenant into the City of Jerusalem, into his newly established capital, leaping and dancing half-naked before the Lord, much to the displeasure of his wife, Michal. The Ark of God, or the Ark of

the Covenant, was a unifying cultic symbol for the twelve tribes of Israel. And this was clearly an attempt by King David to bring together the divided peoples, so they could once and for all unite and defeat their common enemy, the Philistines.

So, what exactly is this Ark of the Covenant? I suspect most of us know more about the Ark of the Covenant from Steven Spielberg's movie, "Raiders of the Lost Ark," than we do from the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, let's begin a quick review:

After Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai, he was instructed by God in Exodus 25 to construct an ark to hold the two stone tablets upon which God had written those Commandments, a box made of acacia wood; about four feet long, two feet wide, and two feet high, overlaid everywhere with gold, probably derived from melting down the Golden Calf they had made waiting for Moses' return. The Ark was topped with two large, golden angels or cherubim, with their wings outstretched. And the Ark was carried using poles inserted through golden rings on its sides.

This Ark of the Covenant thereafter would be the place where Moses would come to talk to God after the people of Israel moved on from Mount Sinai. God was imagined to be hovering over the wings of the two golden cherubim, the so-called Mercy Seat, which plays an important role later in Christian theology. From there, God and Moses would adjudicate the life of the people of

Israel, as in last week's story about a push for democracy among the Israelites. Whenever the Israelites encamped, a tent, the so-called Tent of Meeting or the Tabernacle, was erected around the Ark of the Covenant. This tent had curtains on all sides, so as to separate the people from this holy place. The tribe of Levi, a tribe of priests, were responsible for attending to the Tent of Meeting and the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark had miraculous powers. It is said to have cleared poisonous animals from the path of the Israelites during the Exodus. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan River into the Promised Land, the Bible says that the river stopped flowing the moment the Ark-bearers set foot in it, so that the people of God crossed over into the Promised Land on dry land. The Ark of the Covenant was also carried around the walls of Jericho six times before the trumpets sounded and the walls of the city came crashing down. The young prophet Samuel was sleeping before the Ark of the Covenant when he first heard God speak to him, in the reading that started this summer series from the Old Testament. At one time, the Ark was regularly carried out into battle against the Philistines, but alas at a battle at Shiloh, the Ark was captured there by the Philistines. The Philistines possessed the Ark for seven months, taking it to several places in their country, and at each place misfortune befell them, according to the Scriptures; sudden tumors, a plague of mice, an outbreak of

boils, and when placed in the temple of the Philistine God, Dagon, the next morning the great statute of Dagon there was found fallen over, lying prostrate, bowed down before the Ark of the Covenant; and on being restored to its place, on the following morning it was again found prostrate and now broken. After this, the Philistines, on the advice of their prophets, returned the sacred relic to the Israelites. And finally in a passage skipped over in today's reading, at one point as the Ark was processing towards Jerusalem, the oxen pulling it shook, and one of the attendants reached out to steady the Ark and was immediately struck dead by God for touching it.

David notes in next week's reading that the Ark of the Covenant lived in a tent, while he lived in a great Royal Palace constructed from the famed cedars of Lebanon, so David was determined to build a great temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark, only because of his sins with Uriah the Hittite and Bathsheba, he was not allowed to by God, as we will hear in two weeks' time. Thus, it was David's son, Wise King Solomon, who built the first great Temple in Jerusalem, which housed the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, a sacred room in the Temple where God was believed to be always present and where no one was allowed to enter, except the High Priest, once a year, on the Day of Atonement, on Yom Kippur, to plead for the forgiveness of his people's sins.

So then, what happened to that Ark, this sacred cultic relic of the Israelites? Well, we are not exactly sure. The last historical mention of the Ark in Scripture is in Second Chronicles, chapter 35, where King Josiah asked the Levites to return the Ark to the Temple where Solomon had originally housed it. There is no mention as to why the Levites had removed the Ark in the first place, nor is there any indication as to whether or not the Levites acquiesced to King Josiah's request, though it is thought they did. Forty years later, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem and raided the Temple and took the Jewish leaders back to Babylon in Exile. Less than ten years after that, King Nebuchadnezzar returned to Jerusalem to put down a rebellion among the people, and took what was left in the Temple, and then burnt the great Solomonic Temple and the City of Jerusalem to the ground.

So, what happened to the Ark? Was it taken back to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar? Was it destroyed with the city? Or was it removed and hidden safely away, as evidently happened earlier when the Pharaoh Shishak of Egypt attacked Jerusalem and raided the Temple during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam? This is the source of the plotline of the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark," but if the Egyptians took the Ark with them back to Egypt, how could Josiah ask the Levites to return it later?

Interestingly, in the book of Second Maccabees, there is mention of a record that tells that Jeremiah, a prophet of Israel who foresaw the rise of the Babylonian Empire in the East, that Jeremiah ordered that the Tent of Meeting and the Ark of the Covenant and the Altar of Incense to accompany him to Mount Nebo, that sacred mount that Moses climbed to see the Promised Land. According to the story in Second Maccabees, when Jeremiah arrived at the mount, he found a room in a cave in which he put the Tent, the Ark, and the Altar; then he blocked up the entrance. When Jeremiah heard of that some of his party tried to find their way back to the cave, he reproved them, saying: 'The place is to remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows them mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord will be seen in the cloud, just as it appeared in the time of Moses.'" (2:6-8). It is not known if this secondhand (see 2:1) account is trustworthy; and even if it is, we may not know it until the Lord comes back, as the account itself proclaims.

After the Babylonian Exile, the nation of Israel was allowed to return to the Promised Land and the Temple was rebuilt, but the Ark of the Covenant was never mentioned again in the Hebrew Scriptures. The only other times the Ark of Covenant is mentioned are in the New Testament, almost 700 years later when it is mentioned briefly in the Epistle to the Hebrews

as an object of ritual no longer needed because of the sacrifice of Jesus. The Ark is also mentioned in the Book of Revelation when the author, St. John the Divine, sees the Ark there in God's temple in heaven.

Other theories and legends concerning the whereabouts of the lost ark abound, including many who claim that it was hidden beneath the Temple mount in Jerusalem, having been buried there before Nebuchadnezzar's forces broke through their siege of the city and could steal it away. Unfortunately, the Temple mount is now home to the Dome of the Rock, an Islamic holy site, and the local Islamic community refuses to allow it to be excavated. So, we cannot know if the Ark is still there. Others claim, however, that it was discovered there by the Crusaders and brought back to Europe; to Rome in one account, to Chartres in another. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims to possess the Ark, under guard in the treasury of the Church of Our Lady Mary of Zion in the city of Axum. Edward Ullendorff, a former Professor of Ethiopian Studies at the University of London, said he personally examined the ark held within the church in 1941 while a British army officer. Describing the ark there, he says, "They have a wooden box, but it's empty. Middle- to late-medieval construction."

Others notes that an artifact recently found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the enigmatic "Copper Scroll," may actually be a treasure map of sorts detailing the location of a number of

precious treasures taken from the Temple before the Babylonians broke down the walls of the city, among them the lost Ark of the Covenant. Whether or not this is true remains to be seen, as no one has yet been able to locate all of the necessary geographical landmarks listed on the scroll. Interestingly, some scholars suggest that the Copper Scroll may literally be the record referred to in 2 Maccabees, which describes Jeremiah hiding the ark. While this is a fascinating speculation, it remains unsubstantiated.

A doubtful Irish tradition maintains that the Ark is buried under the sacred Hill of Tara in Ireland. Some scholars believe that this is the source of the Irish "pot of gold at the end of the rainbow" legend. Some explorers in our own century have claimed to actually have seen the lost Ark of the Covenant buried under Mt. Calvary in one story, and others claim to have seen it on Mt. Pisgah near Mt. Nebo. Both reports are held in low esteem by the archaeological community, and neither has been able to substantiate the wild claims with any evidence.

So, in the end, the Ark of the Covenant remains lost to all but God. Interesting theories like the ones presented here continue to be offered and may indeed excite the imagination, but the Ark of the Covenant has yet to be found. The writer of 2 Maccabees may very well be right; we may not find out what happened to the lost Ark until the Lord Himself returns. Amen.