

“DISCOVERING” THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

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INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, the world has been intrigued by the mystery of the ark of the covenant and its location. Even Hollywood realized this and “cashed in” on people’s curiosity about this subject:

Released on June 12, 1981, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* became the year's top-grossing film and remains one of the highest-grossing films ever made. It was nominated for nine Academy Awards in 1982, including Best Picture...The film's critical and popular success led to three additional films...a television series...and 15 video games as of 2009. In 1999, the film was included in the United States Library of Congress' National Film Registry as having been deemed “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” (www.wikipedia.org).

The Bible reveals these fundamental facts about the ark:

- It was an important part of the tabernacle built during the time of Moses. Of all the instructions for tabernacle parts, instructions for the ark were given first (Ex. 25:8ff).
- It was made by special craftsmen (Ex. 31:1-6; 35:25ff).
- It was made of acacia wood overlaid with gold (Ex. 25:10-11).
- It was 45 inches long, 27 inches wide, and 27 inches tall (Ex. 25:10).
- It contained the two tables of the Law (Ex. 25:16, 21; Deut. 10:2, 5), the golden pot of manna (Ex. 16:32-34), and Aaron’s rod which budded (Num. 17:10; Heb. 9:3-5).
- The ark of the covenant was sometimes called by other names, such as “*the ark of the testimony*” (Ex. 25:22), “*the ark of the LORD [Jehovah]*” (Josh. 3:13), “*the ark of God [Elohim]*” (1 Sam. 3:3), “*the ark of the God [Elohim] of Israel*” (1 Sam. 5:7).
- It was in “*the most holy place*” of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:34).
- The location of the ark was a place from which God spoke (Ex. 25:22; 29:42; 30:36; Num. 7:89, 17:4; cf. Lev. 16:2).

- The lid of the ark was called “*the mercy seat,*” over which cherubim spread their wings (Ex. 25:17-20; cf. Lev. 16).
- The ark represented the throne of God in Heaven, where the presence of God is in the Most Holy Place, sitting on the throne of mercy amongst His holy angels (Ex. 26:34; Psa. 11:4; Isa. 6:1ff).
- The ark represented the power, glory, and mercy of God.
- Once per year, on the day of atonement, the high priest would sprinkle blood eastward seven times on the mercy seat as a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice (Lev. 16:14).

TRANSPORTING THE ARK

The tabernacle was intended to be a portable temple (cf. 1 Sam. 1:9; 3:3; cf. 1:24), and God had specific instructions for transporting each part of the tabernacle, including the ark.

- First of all, the ark had to be covered by the priests of the line of Aaron (Num. 4:5-6, 15, 17-20).
- Then it could only be transported by certain descendants of Levi – the Kohathites (Num. 3:31; 4:4-6, 15, 18-20). Levi had three sons (Num. 3:17) – Gershon (Num. 3:25-26), Kohath (Num. 3:31), and Merari (Num. 3:36-37). Each of these three families had different duties involving the transportation of the tabernacle, with the family of Kohath commanded to move “...*the ark, and the table, and the candlestick, and the altars, and the vessels of the sanctuary wherewith they minister, and the hanging, and all the service thereof*” (Num. 3:31).
- The ark was only to be carried by staves, and it was not to be touched (Ex. 25:14; 37:5; Num. 4:15; 7:7-9).

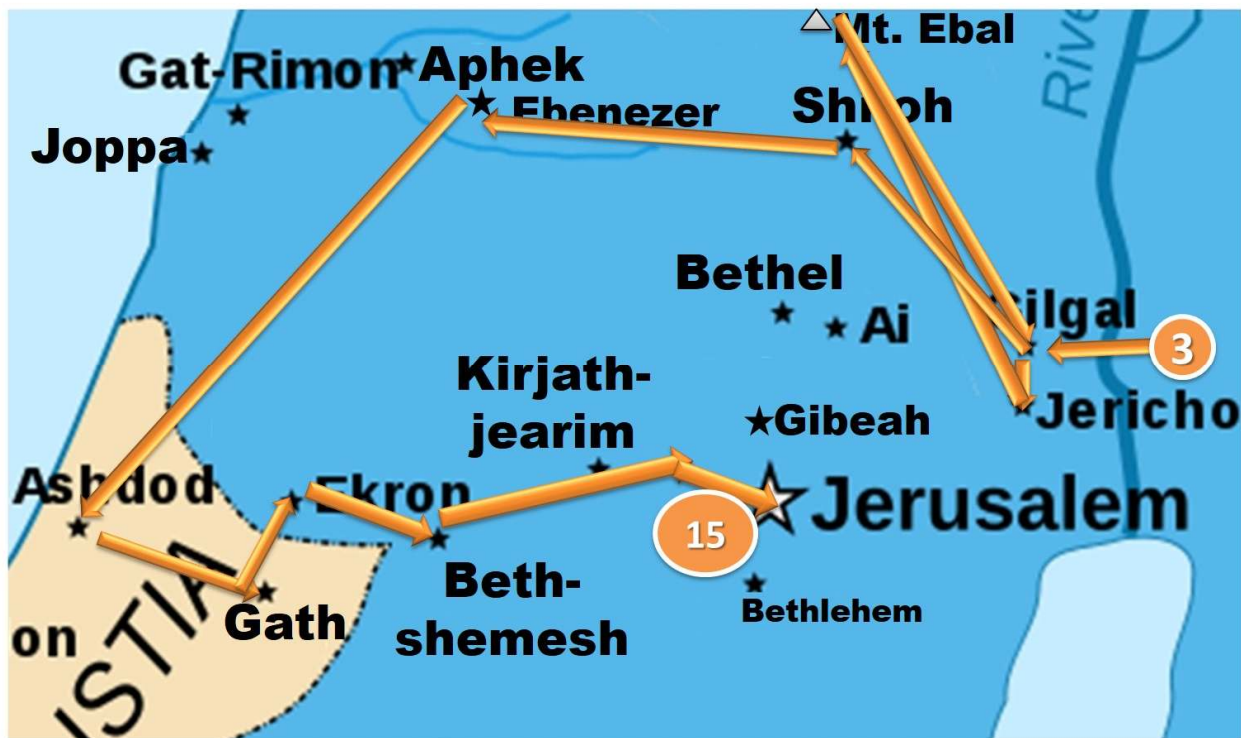
These specific rules for transporting the ark were violated when David was transporting the ark by oxen and cart (2 Sam. 6). Uzzah touched the ark to steady it when the cart shook, resulting in Uzzah’s immediate death (2 Sam. 6:6-7; 1 Chr. 15:13). God had also punished the Philistines while the ark was in their possession (1 Sam. 4:10 – 6:11), and the town of Beth-shemesh lost 50,070 men because they had the audacity to open the ark and look inside (1 Sam. 6:19-20; cf. Ex. 19:21; Num. 4:5). When God specifies His will, men must listen and precisely obey!

TRACKING THE ARK

In Samuel’s day, when Eli was high priest at Shiloh, the people trusted in the ark to deliver them from the Philistines instead of trusting in God: “...*Let us fetch the*

ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies" (1 Sam. 4:3; cf. Prov. 3:5-6). God punished the Israelites by allowing the Philistines to defeat them and capture the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 4:10-11). From that day forward, the ark would be transported to many different locations.

The following is a list of locations for the ark mentioned in the Scriptures: 1. Sinai (Exo. 24:18 - Num. 10:10); 2. Wilderness (Num. 10:11 - Jos. 3:13); 3. Crossing the Jordan (Jos. 3:14-17); 4. Gilgal (Jos. 4:19); 5. Jericho (Jos. 6:1 - 7:6); 6. Mt. Ebal (Jos. 8:30-35); 7. Back to Gilgal (Jos. 9:6; 10:6; 14:6); 8. Shiloh (Jos. 18:1; Judges 20:27; 1 Sam. 1:3; 3:3); 9. Ebenezer (1 Sam. 4); 10. Taken by Philistines to Ashdod (1 Sam. 5:1-7); 11. Gath (1 Sam. 5:8-9); 12. Ekron (1 Sam. 5:10-12); 13. Beth-shemesh (1 Sam. 6); 14. Kirjath-jearim / Gibeah (1 Sam. 7:1-2; 14:2, 16, 18; 2 Sam. 6:2; 1 Chr. 13:6); 15. Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:3ff; 1 Chr. 15:1-15; 2 Sam. 15:24-29; 1 Kin. 8:1-11; 2 Chr. 35:1-5). Compare those numbered locations with this map:



The last known location of the ark was in Jerusalem in the seventh century B.C. Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 B.C., so what happened to the ark of the covenant? It seems that nobody on earth today knows for sure. Perhaps God allowed it to be destroyed with the destruction of the temple in

586 B.C. Perhaps God allowed the Babylonians to take it (cf. 1 Sam. 4:10-11). One tradition says this is what happened, but the ark is not listed among the treasures taken by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:13-17). A rabbinical tradition says that priests buried the ark in Jerusalem in the temple mount. Another tradition says that Jeremiah removed the ark from Jerusalem. It is interesting that there is no mention of the ark in the book of Ezra, when the temple was being rebuilt (515 B.C. – cf. Ezra 1:7-11; 5:14-15; 6:5, 14). According to Jewish historian Josephus, the ark was not in the second temple, 515 B.C. The ark is conspicuously missing from Ezekiel’s temple vision (Ezek. 40-48). Some believe God took the ark up to Heaven (cf. Rev. 11:19; cf. 2:17; 21:3).

Thankfully, people do not need to know what happened to the ark to go to Heaven (cf. Deut. 29:29; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3). The truth is that the ark and other parts of the tabernacle worship system were simply shadows of spiritual New Testament counterparts (Heb. 8:1-6). In fact, Jeremiah had even said that the ark would not be important under the new covenant: *“And it shall come to pass, when ye be multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, saith the LORD, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the LORD: neither shall it come to mind: neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit it; neither shall that be done any more”* (Jer. 3:16).

Apparently it was not God’s will for the ark to be preserved among men. It was wise to remove it from men, so it could not become a snare to them. There can be a danger in holding on to “holy relics,” because men have a tendency to worship those things and trust in them instead of God. Many physical, religious objects in the Bible became an idolatrous snare to God’s people, including: the ark of the covenant (1 Sam. 4:3); the brass serpent (Num. 21:8; 2 Kin. 18:1-4); Gideon’s golden ephod (Judg. 8:22-27); and Solomon’s temple (Jer. 7:4-14).

CONCLUSION

The ark contained the Words of a covenant that is now “old” (Ex. 34:27-28; Heb. 8:13). Christians are under a new and better covenant (Heb. 7:22). The High Priest and Minister of the true tabernacle has opened up the way to the true throne of mercy in the Holiest Place of all (Heb. 4-10). Men should learn from the ark of the covenant that they should not focus on physical things, but rather focus on God and spiritual things which last forever (1 Sam. 4:3; Ecc. 12:13-14; Mt. 6:19-21; 16:26; 24:35; 2 Cor. 4:18; Col. 3:1-4; 1 Jn. 2:15-17).

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