

Lost Contents of the Ark of the Covenant

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Whenever the subject of ancient technology comes up, most people have been conditioned by spectacular movies and TV shows to think right away about the Ark of the Covenant. Some say it was a capacitor of some kind—a power source containing a communicator with which to converse with ancient aliens. Others insist it was a weapon of mass destruction. Fantastic claims have been published describing beams issuing from it that destroyed entire armies, although those claims are not found in the Bible. The Ark is also said to have been the place where the Ten Commandments were kept. But if you read the passage quoted above from the book of Hebrews, and parallel passages from Exodus and Numbers, you soon realize that's only part of the story.

“The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lamp stand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Holy of Holies, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered Ark of the Covenant. This Ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the Ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover.”

(Hebrews 9:1-5)

The Ark of the Covenant According to the Book of Exodus

The book of Exodus tells us that when Moses climbed Sinai to receive the Law (delivered to the Israelites after their escape from Egypt), he was instructed to build an Ark upon which the glory of God would rest.

"Ark" comes from the Greek word for chest. A "covenant" is a binding contract or legal agreement. When the original Hebrew texts were translated into Greek, forming what is now called the Septuagint, (the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament), the translated words carried over into our English versions of the Bible. Hence, the Ark of the Covenant was originally meant to serve as a religious symbol of God's 'contract' with the Israelite people—not a technological marvel or weapon of war.



Model Ark of the Covenant (Public Domain)

It was a box, about two and a half feet high and wide and four and a half feet long, made of wood, covered with gold leaf, and transported by means of two long poles that ran through rings placed on its side. When not being carried about it was housed within the Holy of Holies—the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting, during the forty years the Israelites were said to have wandered in the Sinai desert.

After the conquest of Canaan, it was placed in a sanctuary at

Shiloh, and was later brought by King David, it is said, to the site of the future Temple at Jerusalem, built by King Solomon. This was the occasion that so inspired David that he "danced before the Lord," much to the disgust of his wife.

By the time the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's temple in 586 BCE the Ark had disappeared from history. Although many have tried to find it, its location has remained a mystery. Some think it resides in a temple in Ethiopia, brought there by the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Others believe it is hidden in the caves of Qumran, buried under the temple mount, or even hidden in a booby-trapped pit on Oak Island off the coast of Nova Scotia! Most scholars believe it was destroyed. Many doubt it ever existed.

The Missing Contents of the Ark

Although most people who have watched the History Channel or read some of the spectacular articles about the Ark know it housed the Ten Commandments, there were actually two more symbolic objects that were alleged to have been placed within the Ark. Exodus 16 and 25, along with Numbers 17, emphasize all three items equally. I Kings 8, which describes the ceremony when Solomon brought the Ark into the temple, mentions only the Ten

Commandments. Apparently by then, some 500 years after the Ark had first been constructed, the other two objects so important to the original authors had either been lost or forgotten.

What were they and why were they so important to the story of the original Ark of the Covenant?

Each item placed in the ark recalled stories found in the Biblical books of Exodus and Numbers that, when taken together, represent the very essence of early Judaism and predate the essential Christian message by a thousand years. Taken together, the three objects symbolized a powerful religious statement.

The 10 Commandments



The first object was, of course, the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. These represented God's law. But the people had broken God's law.

While Moses was on Sinai receiving instructions that forbade the worship of idols, the people were down below dancing around a golden calf. The tablets, therefore, would forever symbolize the people's rejection of God's law.

This 1768 parchment by Jekuthiel Sofer emulated the 1675 Ten Commandments (Public Domain)

The Adoration of the Golden Calf by Nicolas Poussin (Public Domain)



The Pot of Manna

The second object was a pot of Manna. "Manna" literally means, "What is it?"

When the people needed food in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt, the texts tell us that God instructed Moses to have them go outside and gather a daily supply of a light bread

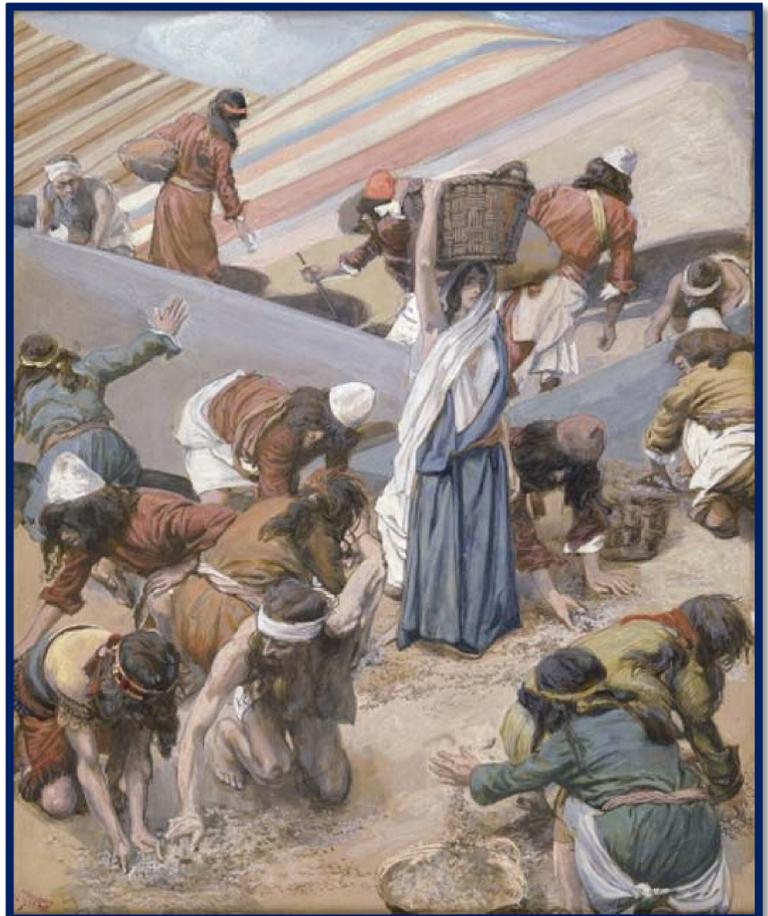


that formed with the dew each morning. Only one day's supply could be gathered because the bread would spoil if hoarded.

Whatever was gathered on Friday would keep for an extra day so that people would not have to break the Sabbath commandment forbidding work on the seventh day. When the people went outside on the first

morning to discover the miracle of God's provision, they saw the bread and said, "*Manna?*—What is it?" The idea was to teach the people to trust in God's daily provision. (This event later prompted a famous Christian petition: "Give us this day our daily bread.")

But after the novelty wore off the people complained, longing for the good old days and "the leeks and onions of Egypt." So, Manna came to represent their *rejection* of God's provision.



The Gathering of the Manna by James Tissot (Public Domain)

Aaron's Rod

The third item was Aaron's rod that budded. Aaron, Moses' brother-in-law, had been selected by God to be High Priest. But the people wanted to elect their own leaders. The texts tell us that they complained to Moses, who passed the word on to God. So, Moses was told to have each tribe select a candidate for High Priest. Each would place his "rod," or walking staff, in the ground to be inspected during the next morning's convocation. The rod that "budded," or took root, would indicate God's choice. The implication was that God's leaders bear fruit, while earthly leaders don't.



Aaron's rod budding. (Public Domain)

Of course, Aaron's rod produced a bud, and he went on to become the first High Priest of Israel. But whenever the people thought about the staff in the Ark they would be reminded of their rejection of God's leadership.

Rejection and Redemption

On the cover of the Ark stood the Mercy Seat. Two carved angels, one on each side with their arched wings meeting in the middle, symbolically looked down at the Ark's contents. There they saw rejection—rejection of God's law (the Ten Commandments), God's provision (the pot of manna), and God's leadership (Aaron's staff). That doesn't leave a lot more of God left to reject.

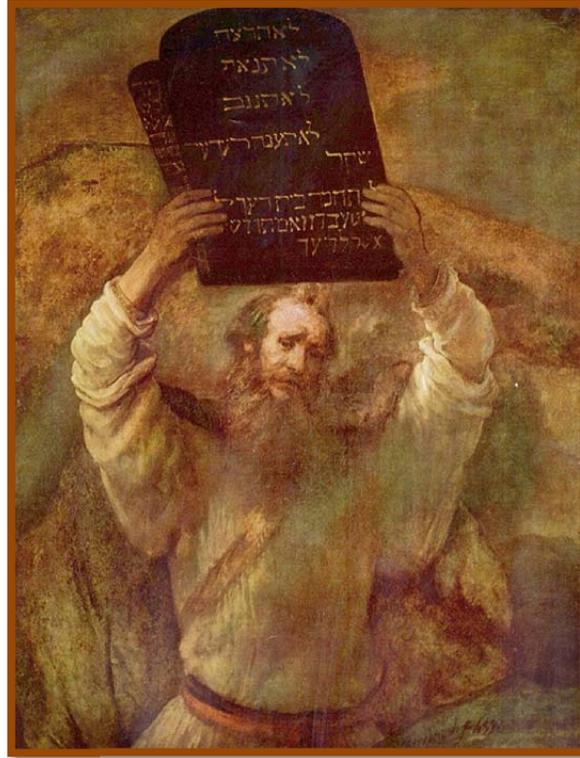


Bowing before the Ark. (Public Domain)

But on one day a year, the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur—the High Priest sprinkled the blood of a sacrificial lamb on the Mercy Seat. On that day the symbolic angel icons would see not rejection, but the blood of the innocent substitute, and the sins of the people would thus be atoned. This was a central religious symbolism called substitutionary atonement, later adopted by Christians who saw Jesus Christ as the sacrificial "lamb of God."

Death Rays and Ancient Technology?

Much speculation has arisen over the true meaning of the Ark. Because the Bible makes a special point of saying Moses' face glowed when he came down from Sinai after talking to God, and because Moses was later said to have worn a cover over his face when he came out from the presence of the Ark, some have speculated that it contained a source of light—perhaps even radiation, which might explain his premature death before he got to enter the Promised Land.



Moses Breaking the Tablets of the Law (1659) by Rembrandt. (Public Domain)

It was said that in the presence of the Ark, Moses would hear the voice of God. This has sparked tales of it being a transmitter through which Moses was in contact with ancient aliens, using details supplied from their blueprints to build the Ark to their specifications.

Because of the Ark's supposed ability to inspire armies in war, and because at least one man is said to have died after he touched it without proper consecration, speculation arose as to its mystical or military powers.

But a careful reading of the text casts doubt on Moses' face "glowing." Instead, the Bible seems to imply that Moses' face wasn't glowing at all, and that caused him such embarrassment that he covered his face because he thought it should glow. After all, he had just supposedly been in the presence of the God of Light.

The Ark of the Covenant is surrounded by mystery. If it exists at all, perhaps it still awaits discovery, resting in its 2,500-year-old hiding place. But its basic meaning to the Israelites was clear: The Ark reminded them of their contract with the God whom they felt chose them to be a special people. It was, plain and simple, a religious symbol that they carried before them into battle—much as the Crusaders carried a cross, or armies carry their flag. It served as inspiration.

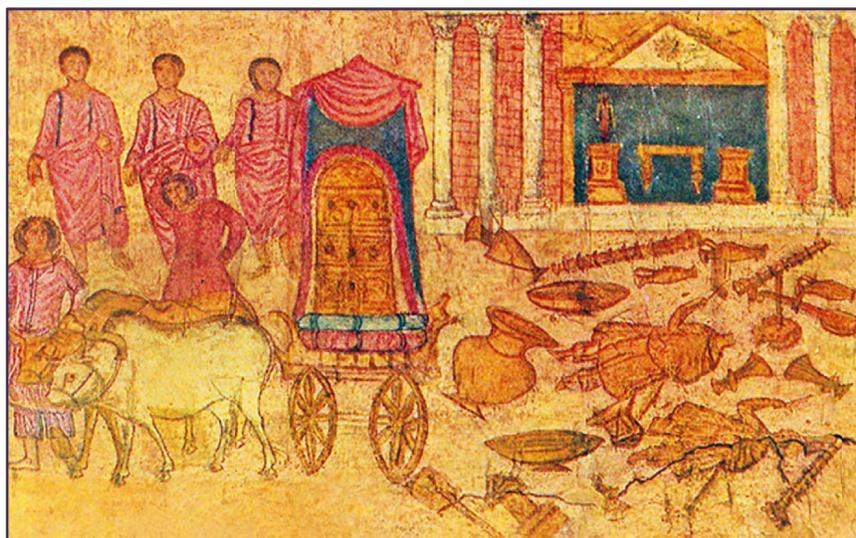
According to the Bible there were no death rays, no secret communications from on high (at least not from any source known to the biblical writers), and certainly no Indiana Jones-type curses.

The Misfortunes of the Ark

That is not to say that curious stories about the Ark don't surround its mythology. In I Samuel 5, the Philistines (just a generation before their champion, Goliath, had his famous confrontation with David, the shepherd boy) had the misfortune of capturing the Ark of the Covenant. They recognized that it was a holy object, even though it belonged to the enemy, so they decided to put it on display in the temple of their god, Dagon. One would suppose that it was a “my god can beat up your god!” kind of thing.

But that’s when the trouble started. Every morning, when the priests of Dagon went in to do whatever it was they did each day, they found that their statue of Dagon had “fallen on his face on the ground before the Ark of the Lord!”

What to do? Well, following the age-old ploy of passing the buck, they decided to move the ark to a different village. But those folks didn’t want it either. After seven months of enduring this kind of religious version of musical chairs, the Philistines finally sent for their priests. They decided to put the Ark in a cart, along with a guilt offering (kind of a “sorry about that” present), hitch the cart to some oxen and send it home to Israel.



Ark in the land of Philistines and the Temple of Dagon (Public Domain)

When they sent it off, the oxen—on their own and with no guidance— “went straight up toward Beth Shemish, keeping on the road and lowing (the Hebrew commentaries usually say ‘singing’ or ‘humming’ instead of ‘lowing’) all the way; they did not turn to the right or to the left.”

Persistent stories eventually grow into a mythology. But is there enough evidence to say that the Ark of the Covenant was really an example of ancient technology?

As always, we have to come to our own conclusions. But when we read the original texts first, rather than simply accepting what we see on television, they seem to point to a powerful religious symbol that, when viewed in its entirety, provides a basis for a three-pronged

metaphor that has been ensconced in the atonement doctrine of two of the world's great religions. The message of the Ark of the Covenant seems to be that people may reject God's law, provision, and leadership, but God has nevertheless atoned for their shortcomings.

Whether or not we personally accept this religious doctrine in a historical or even metaphorical way, it seems to offer a hopeful message in troubled times.

Top Image: A model of the Ark of the Covenant from biblical description (Blake Patterson/CC BY 2.0);Deriv.