



2020

Raiders Of The Lost Ark

Dwight Page

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review



Part of the [European History Commons](#), and the [European Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Page, Dwight (2020) "Raiders Of The Lost Ark," *Swiss American Historical Society Review*: Vol. 56 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/sahs_review/vol56/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Swiss American Historical Society Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Raiders of the Lost Ark

by Dwight Page

Although a French national, John Calvin spent a large part of his career as a pastor and a theologian in Switzerland. Specifically, he resided in Geneva between 1541 and 1564 and transformed the city into his beloved Protestant City of God, a safe haven for Protestant refugees from all over Europe. Indeed, so thorough was the Reformation in Geneva that the city became known as the Protestant Rome and the center of the new Protestant faith. In the sixteenth century, at the time of the Reformation, Geneva was truly the Mecca to which many Protestants gravitated and to which many Protestants looked for hope and inspiration.

During these years in Geneva, one of Calvin's most salient contributions to the development of Christian theology was his analysis and elucidation of the concept of the divine Covenant between God and Man, first made between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden, next between God and Abraham in Ur of the Chaldeans, then 400 years later in Egypt between God and Moses, and finally more than 1,000 years after that, consummated in the new Covenant between God and Man splendidly expressed by the perfect life and resurrection of God's own son Jesus Christ. Calvin elevated the study of this theological concept to an unprecedented level of scholarship and intellectual reflection and discussion.

Not only did Calvin himself devote much attention to this subject, notably in Part Two of his seminal work *Institutes of the Christian Faith*. He also influenced his successors over the next two centuries to further explore and explain the meaning and importance of this concept of the perennial covenant between God and Man. Paul Helm, for example, see Protestant theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries as a coherent and cohesive body of teaching handed down from Calvin to Beza, to Knox, to Ames and Perkins and achieving classic formulation in the Westminster Confession of 1648.¹

Departing from its initial roots in the writings of John Calvin in sixteenth century Geneva, the Westminster Confession formulated a more precise two covenant form of Christian theology. One might say, in other words, that this latter document is the distillation, synthesis and consummation of two centuries of Calvinist reflection upon this important and central topic of the Christian faith.

According to the seventeenth century Westminster Confession, the first covenant made by God with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and through him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience to God's commandments. The second covenant is commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein the Lord freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him. The first and original covenant described in the Old Testament was based solely on obedience and was cancelled by sin. God's response to the failure of this original covenant of works was its replacement by a new covenant of grace, based on faith. According to this new covenant, made in the New Testament, one is saved by both perfect works and by the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus, according to this New Covenant, both good works and divine grace are prerequisites for salvation.²

Based on this concept of the Double Covenant, of which he himself was the original author, Calvin had taught long before the advent of the Westminster Confession that a person has the assurance of salvation, provided that he accept accountability for his own behavior. True salvation is thus the consequence of the covenant between God and Man, faith or belief in the validity of that covenant, and manifold good works demonstrating that faith. According to Calvin, the entire

¹For a fuller analysis of this subject, see Paul Helm, *Faith with Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

²Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 17-18.

Ark of the Covenant



edifice of the Christian faith rests on veneration and respect for this historically perpetuated and renewed covenant—first between Adam and God, then between Abraham and God, then between Moses and God—which finds its ultimate expression in the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³

We have thus established that the concept of the covenant between God and Man is one of the central pillars of Calvin’s theology: he spends a great deal of time in the *Institutes of the Christian Faith* analyzing and elucidating this theme. Indeed, among the Protestant theologians, John Calvin is the principal exponent of Covenant theology.

It is not surprising that Calvin would attribute such extraordinary importance to the theme of the covenant between God and Man, given that the entire Old Testament is devoted to the frequent reiteration of the renewal of this covenant between God and the human race. Indeed, the entire history of the Jews is the story of their unique relationship with God, a relationship which is distinguished from other religions by the Jews’ historic commitment to the articulation of their

³ Calvin devotes an entire chapter of the *Institutes* (II.10) to explaining both the Old and the New Covenant. For a more extensive discussion, see Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 138.

very special covenant with Yahweh, most dramatically expressed in the Ten Commandments which Yahweh gave to Moses on Mount Sinai during the Exodus from Egypt.

One of the strongest features of Israel's faith, presented in the Old Testament, was its deep antipathy to any graphic representation of the Deity in image form. Naturally, because Yahweh Himself, in the third of the Ten Commandments, had expressly forbidden the creation or worship of idols. There is no valid evidence anywhere to prove that Israel ever did permit or value images of Yahweh Himself, and so no plausible reason exists for doubting that the prohibition of images of Yahweh goes back to the Mosaic origins of Yahwism.

The divine presence in Israel was in no way linked to any kind of image, or symbolic representation of the Deity, Yahweh. Nonetheless, given the importance which Jewish society traditionally attributed to the reaffirmation of their faith in Yahweh—the Covenant between God and Man, and the religious ceremonies at which this covenant was formally and publicly renewed—were associated with certain Holy Objects which were thought to belong to Yahweh and to his cult.

One year after the Exodus from Egypt, in the wilderness of Sinai, Yahweh had in fact given specific instructions to Moses concerning the construction of these Holy Objects and Places (Exodus 25):⁴ These were the Tent of the Tabernacle; the special sanctuary within the Tabernacle known as the Holy of Holies; and the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments, which would occupy a revered place at the heart of the Holy of Holies. The Jews seriously believed that God sat on the Mercy Seat above the Ark, and that in this most holy place, he would hold counsel with those rare prophets and priests whom he deemed worthy to commune privately with Him. Wherever the Jews went during their peregrinations, the Tabernacle, the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant were to accompany them and were always to be placed at the geographic center of their encampments. These three sacred items formed the foremost sanctu-

⁴In this article, the following version of the Holy Bible is used: *The Holy Bible: Commonly Known as the Authorized King James Version* (Nashville: The Gideons International, 1978).



Tent of the Tabernacle

ary of Yahweh, in which Israel believed that His divine presence appeared to their chosen representatives, in order to reveal His will and purpose and in order to guide their conduct and shape their destiny.⁵

As Judaism over the centuries evolved into Christianity, the person of the semihuman/semidivine Christ Himself came to replace the original Ark and the Tent of the Tabernacle as the ultimate symbol of the perpetually renewed covenant between God and Man. During his 33-year sojourn upon Earth, the Christ became the manifestation and the personification of this new Covenant between mankind and the Deity.

Christ was well aware that after his death and resurrection, his followers would require visible and tangible proof of his eternal existence and his eternal power over their lives and human events, especially given that the original proof of God's power among men—the Ark of the Covenant—had been lost centuries before. Thus, long before his crucifixion, Christ ordained the institution of the papacy, declaring to Simon Peter, the First Pope, that he was destined to be “the rock upon which he would build his Church.”

⁵ R.E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 28-38.

The long succession of Popes from the time of the Resurrection until the Reformation in the sixteenth century thus constituted the strongest conceivable physical bond between God and Man, and during all those years the Holy Pontiffs in Rome served as a constant physical reminder of the eternal Covenant between God and the human race. And, as if the fact that the Christ Himself had personally appointed the Popes to represent him on earth were not enough, between 1508 and 1512, God sent another of his representatives—Michelangelo—into the heart of the Vatican in order to paint the famous frescoes on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which magnificently retell the book of Genesis and God's original covenant with Adam, and which would further enhance the prestige of the Papacy and the Church.

After the fall of Rome in the fifth century A.D., the Kings of the various Germanic nation states of northern Europe, likewise came to be regarded as vital links between God and his people, and as visible human manifestations of the reality of the eternal covenant between the Deity and mankind. These Kings for centuries were seriously considered to be the infallible vicars of Christ in their respective kingdoms. Moreover, these rulers' authority was upheld and justified by many works of philosophy and political theory corroborating the widespread belief in the divine right of Kings to rule—unreproached—their kingdoms.

Thus, throughout the entire Middle Ages, people constantly looked to two sources for spiritual comfort and inspiration: the Holy See and the Vatican in Rome, and the King of their particular Kingdom. In this regard, the Pope in Rome and the King of the Nation constituted proof that God had not forgotten his people but rather that He was constantly watching over and protecting them and was continually renewing his covenant with them.

Unfortunately during the Reformation, a serious problem arose when Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin broke with Rome and established independent Churches. In these new Protestant urban republics of Europe and Switzerland, there was neither a traditional Pope nor a traditional King.

Hence, in order to fill the subsequent vacuum of authority and restore hope and faith to their congregations, Protestant reformers like

Calvin in Geneva were compelled to find new ways to vividly represent and symbolize the age old covenant between God and man, upon which their Protestant congregations relied for hope and spiritual sustenance. Given that this covenant was the foundation of the new Protestant theology, Calvin had to find a way to make the concept of this covenant meaningful and understandable to his congregations in Geneva and elsewhere.

It was at this time that the Ark of the Covenant came to play a vital role in the sermons of the new Protestant preachers of Switzerland and Protestant Europe, for there is no more famous, more powerful or more memorable symbol of this Holy Covenant than the Ark, which God gave to the Hebrews during the Exodus out of Egypt. The new Bibles prepared for these new Protestant congregations, such as the King James Version, contained beautifully decorated illustrations of the Ark and the Tent of the Tabernacle, so that the people of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries would have a clearer and more precise image of these Holy Objects and Places in their minds. Clearly, the powerful visual image and material object of the Ark is of capital and critical importance for anyone interested in the study of covenant theology. In sum, the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament, and the person of the Christ in the New Testament, are the two essential symbolic centerpieces of the foundation upon which covenant theology, and Protestant theology, rest.

We all remember the story: God led Joseph, who had been thrown by his envious brothers into an empty well, to the land of Egypt, where Joseph became a Prince of the Royal House and chief advisor to Pharaoh. Joseph, guided by wisdom of divine inspiration, subsequently saved the Egyptians from famine and made them prosper, for which achievement he was much adored. The now all powerful Joseph then invited his fellow Hebrews to come to live with him in Egypt. Initially welcomed by the Egyptians and treated as their equals, Joseph's brethren and their Hebrew compatriots were later enslaved by a Pharaoh "who did not know Joseph" (Exodus 1:8) and were condemned to eternal hard labor in the building of Pharaoh's treasure cities. During the four hundred years of this Egyptian bondage, God did not forget his original covenant with Abraham: during the Reign of Ramses the First,

God miraculously saved the Hebrew slave child Moses from Ramses' edict that all the first born male children of Israel should be killed. God then caused the Hebrew baby to be placed in a basket of reeds, set adrift upon the Nile and brought the enfant to the bathing pool of Pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her own and once again unwittingly made a Hebrew a mighty Prince of Egypt.

Through manifold wonders and miracles, God used Moses and his brother Aaron to keep his covenant with the Hebrews and to lead them out of bondage in Egypt, in the manner of a wondrous Exodus. Soon thereafter, on Mount Sinai, God renewed his covenant with the Hebrews, this time with his servant Moses, in the form of the Ten Commandments.

However, because of their disobedience and faithlessness, the Hebrews were compelled to wander for forty years in the wilderness of Sinai. It was during this nomadic period of Hebrew history that God gave Moses specific and precise instructions for the construction of the Tent of the Tabernacle, which was to reside literally at the heart of the Hebrew nation and which was to be the center of their faith. (Exodus, chapters 25, 26, 27). At the heart of this Tabernacle, in the Holy of Holies, stood the beautiful golden Ark of the Covenant, whose construction was carefully described and ordained by God. Moses would often converse with God in the Holy of Holies. Indeed, the Pentateuch concludes with these words: "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face." (Deuteronomy 34:10).

Given these facts, it is incomprehensible and amazing that no one today knows for sure what actually became of the Ark. And yet this is the case. This article will strive to shed light upon the likely location of the lost Ark of the Covenant in our own times.

First of all, let us consider the chronology of the known historical facts concerning the Ark, as revealed in Scripture. What is most striking about this first portion of this story is the extraordinary historical veracity, historical accuracy and meticulous attention to detail characterizing every phase of these recorded facts.

To begin, a detailed description of the construction of the Ark of the Covenant by Moses, as dictated by God, is provided in Exodus

25:10-22. The Ark was a rectangular box, made of acacia wood and measured two and a half by one and a half by one and a half cubits. The whole was covered with gold and was carried on poles inserted in rings at the four lower corners. God declared that only the Levites might have the privilege of carrying the Ark. No other tribe of Israel was to touch it or come near it. The lid, or mercy-seat, was a solid gold plate surrounded by two antithetically placed cherubs with outspread wings. Here, on this mercy-seat, God would appear on rare occasions to commune privately with those of his priests whom he deemed to be sufficiently pure and worthy of this honor. When God was present, the Holy of Holies glowed with radiance and could be seen from afar, bearing witness that God was in His residence, among His people.

The ark served as a receptacle for the two tables of the Decalogue and also for the pot of manna and Aaron's miraculous rod, with which he had wrought miracles in Egypt when seeking to obtain the freedom of the Hebrew slaves. It was also the holiest shrine in all of Israel, since it served as the meeting-place in the inner sanctuary where the Lord revealed his will to his servants. Thus it served as the symbol of the divine presence guiding God's people. The ark was first made at Sinai by Bezalel to the specifications given by God to Moses. It was used as a depository for the written law during the Exodus in the desert, and played a significant part at the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land, the fall of heathen Jericho, and the ceremony of remembering the covenant at Mount Ebal.

From Gilgal, the Ark was moved to Bethel (Judges 2:1; 20:27), but was taken to Shiloh in the time of the Judges (1 Samuel 1:3; 3:3), remaining there until captured by the Philistines on the battlefield at Ebenezer (1 Samuel 4). Because its presence caused seven months of plagues, the frightened and repentant Philistines perceived its divine and miraculous nature, and so, although pagans, they had the good sense to return it to Kiriath-jearim, where it remained for 20 years (1 Samuel 5:1-7:2), except possibly for a temporary move to King Saul's camp near Beh-aven (1 Samuel 14:18). King David installed the ark in a tent at Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6), and would not remove it during Abasalom's rebellion (2 Samuel 15:25-29).

It was placed in the First Temple with great ceremony during the reign of David's son King Solomon. Moreover, we know the exact date that King Solomon began to build his magnificent Temple, whose primary purpose would be to house the Ark. According to I Kings 6:1, it was precisely 480 years after the Exodus from Egypt that Solomon began the work of construction on this splendid holy edifice.⁶

The Bible contains two detailed descriptions of Solomon's Temple. The first is provided by 1 Kings, chapters 6 and 7; the other is to be found in 2 Chronicles, chapters 3-4. The preparatory undertakings took three years; the construction itself required seven years (I Kings: 6:38). To build this resplendent temple, 100,000 talents of gold and one million talents of silver were used. Since a talent equals about 34 kilograms, that would mean that the Temple of Solomon contained 3.4 million kilograms of gold, which is nearly as much gold as is currently contained in the United States depository in Fort Knox.⁷

It was at this time, immediately following the completion of its construction, that King Solomon placed the Ark of the Covenant inside this First Temple, with great ceremony, pomp, and splendor. The Bible tells us that the Lord, grateful for this expression of popular homage and affection, filled the Temple that day with a radiant, blinding glow. This memorable event occurred circa 955 B.C. and is described in consummate detail in I Kings 8:1-21.⁸

Clearly, up to this point, we know everything about the Ark, its whereabouts and its progress through history. It is last mentioned in Scripture during the reforms of King Josiah, which took place circa 622 B.C., when Josiah told the Levites, the guardians of the Ark appointed by the Lord, to put the Ark back in the House of the Lord (2 Chronicles 35: 3).

However, just as the story of the first centuries of the Ark's existence is a masterpiece of historical precision and documentation,

⁶Stuart Munro-Hay, *The Quest for the Ark of the Covenant* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd., 2005), 17.

⁷Victor Avigdor Horowitz, "Yahweh's exalted House—aspects of the design and symbolism of Solomon's Temple," in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 86-87.

⁸Graham Hancock, *The Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1992), 365.



First Temple built by King Solomon.

by the same token, the story of the Ark after this last explicit reference to it by King Josiah in the year 622 B.C., becomes one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of history. This is an altogether strange and inexplicable occurrence: the Ark, for centuries the holiest relic in Israel and the center of the ceremonial and religious life of the Jewish nation, suddenly vanishes from the record. Nowhere is any further detail about it provided; the later books of the Bible virtually ignore it.

The Ark of the Covenant literally disappeared off of the pages of history by the time of the Babylonian Captivity. We do know that Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in the year 587 B.C., yet no mention is made of the Ark, in the detailed enumeration of the Temple treasures stolen by the Babylonians, which is provided in the last chapter of 2 Kings.

In addition, nothing is said in the Bible about the Ark in the Old Testament after the return from Babylon, but the Apocrypha does state that the Ark could not be found when the Jewish people rebuilt the Second Temple during the time of Ezra, Zechariah, and Nehemiah, circa 515 B.C., during the reign of the Persian King Darius.

Thus, the Holy of Holies in the new Second Temple became an empty chamber, without the Ark of the Covenant. When the haughty Roman General Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 B.C., he demanded the privilege of entering the Holy of Holies, in order to gaze upon this wondrous sight. When he did, he came out disappointed, saying that he could not understand what all the interest was about the sanctuary, when it was only an empty room.

A large number of theories have been advanced to explain the mysterious disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant. Some of these theories maintain that the Ark was actually destroyed and thus no longer exists; others, more enticing and tantalizing, maintain that on the contrary the Ark was hidden away for safekeeping. These latter theories, of course, affirm that the Ark is still with us here on Earth.

For example, in his essay examining the possible solutions to the puzzle of the lost Ark, John Day explores and analyzes the validity of 12 different views about the true date of the disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant. Weighing all the evidence, Mr. Day draws the sober conclusion that the evidence strongly suggests that the Ark disappeared around the time of the Babylonian conquest and exile, and the most likely explanation for its disappearance from history is that it was simply destroyed along with the First Temple of Solomon by the Babylonians at the time of their sack of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.⁹

This answer, however, is far too obvious and simple. There are several other theories which logically account for the disappearance and loss of the Ark of the Covenant and which deserve our attention. Chief among these are the following:

First, according to the Talmud (TB Yoma 52b-53b, TJ Shekalim 6:1), the Ark was either hidden by King Josiah or transported to exile in Babylon along with the other Jewish treasures. Maimonides likewise accepts the tradition that King Josiah hid the Ark, long before the Babylonian invasion.

⁹ John Day, "Whatever Happened to the Ark of the Covenant?" in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 265.

Secondly, many believe that the wicked Jewish Queen Athaliah (841-835 B.C.) destroyed the Ark. Athaliah was a pagan, a worshiper of Baal, who hated Yahweh and who sought to lead the Hebrews astray to worship foreign idols. Given that the temples of Baal in Judah had recently been destroyed and her pagan kinfolk slaughtered by the righteous Jehu, there is every reason to believe that Queen Athaliah, in a move of vengeance, might have resorted to this last extremity, might have stolen into the easily accessible Temple of Solomon under the cover of darkness, and might have destroyed the Ark, the symbol of her nemesis, Jehovah. Corroborating this particular theory, we have the statement in Scripture: "...the children of the wicked Athaliah had violated the House of God and had even used the sacred things of the House of the Lord for the Baals (II Chronicles 24:7).

Thirdly, some scholars surmise that King Hezekiah (715-686 B.C.) gave the Ark to Sennacherib as part of his tribute payment in the year 701 B.C. (2 Kings 18).

Then there is the hypothesis that the Ark might have been removed from Solomon's Temple by faithful Levite priests when the evil and disrespectful King Manasseh (687-642 B.C.) callously and thoughtlessly placed an idol in the Temple (2 Kings 21:1-9). This school of thought maintains that the Levites clearly never would have tolerated the outrage that the holy Ark would remain in the same place as a pagan idol.

Fifthly, there exists the claim that the Ark was hidden by faithful Levite priests in the warren of passages beneath the First Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, shortly before the Babylonians destroyed it in 586 B.C. Unfortunately, this particular theory cannot be tested, because the site is home to the shrine of the Dome of the Rock, sacred to Islam. Digging beneath this site is simply not an option.

A sixth claim came from Ron Wyatt, an amateur archaeologist who said that in 1982 he found the Ark beneath the hill outside Jerusalem on which Christ was rumored to have been crucified. Blood from the crucifixion, he claimed, had dripped from the Cross through a fissure in the rock and onto the Ark. Wyatt further stated that he personally examined this dried blood, and that it contained only 24 chromosomes rather than the normal 46 found in normal human beings. But nobody

has ever seen it again, and Wyatt has also claimed a number of other archaeological finds that most scholars consider dubious.

A seventh theory has been advanced, proposing that Menelik I, the alleged son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, took the Ark to his new Kingdom of Ethiopia in Africa, before the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem. In defense of this point of view, it is common knowledge that the Queen of Sheba greatly admired the Temple of Solomon and the Ark of the Covenant; one of the main reasons that she came to visit Solomon, shortly after the construction of the Temple in 955 B.C., was in order to admire these wonders. According to this theory, the Ark still resides to this day in the town of Aksum, Ethiopia, inside the Saint Mary of Zion Cathedral. Church authorities, however, say that only one man, the guardian of the Ark, is allowed to see it, and they have never permitted scientists to examine the object for authenticity.

Finally, the most celebrated and glamorous of all the theories surrounding the disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant is that Pharaoh Shishak took the Ark to the city of Tanis in Egypt after he invaded and plundered Jerusalem during the reign of Jeroboam in the year 926 B.C. (1 Kings 14:25-28). This theory has given rise to the most famous quest for the Ark: in the 1981 movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, adventurer and hero Indiana Jones travels to Tanis after the CIA in Washington inform him that the Nazis plan to excavate the Ark themselves and use its awesome power to achieve world conquest and dominion. Indiana has received credible information that the Ark is hidden within a pyramid in the recently discovered ancient Egyptian city of Tanis, and he must find and retrieve this holy relic for his employer, the American government, before the Nazis have the opportunity to steal it for themselves and their own evil purposes. The outcome of this particular scenario is well known to all cinema goers: although the Nazis initially do succeed in stealing the Ark, God does not allow them to keep it. Since they are criminals who plan to abuse the Ark and use it to commit horrific crimes, God, outraged by their despicable wickedness, destroys them with fire and brimstone, when they attempt to open the Ark on a remote Mediterranean island in order to discover its awesome secrets. Thereupon, Indiana Jones retrieves the Ark and returns it to its rightful own-

ers, the American government, who proceed to store the holy relic in an unknown location in one of their secret warehouses.

We now come to the heart and central purpose of this essay: the affirmation that the lost Ark of the Covenant indeed still does exist, and the presentation of a serious proposal concerning how best to find it.

Of all the theories which have been proposed concerning the disappearance and the location of the lost Ark of the Covenant, the most plausible and credible, by far, is the ancient, respected tradition that the prophet Jeremiah hid the Ark shortly before the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.

The story comes from 2 Maccabees 2:4-8 and goes like this: It was also in the writing that the prophet Jeremiah, having received an oracle, ordered that the Tent of the Tabernacle and the Ark should be removed from the Temple of Solomon and should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God (Mount Nebo). And Jeremiah came and found a cave, and he brought there the Tent and the Ark and Altar of Incense, and he sealed up the entrance. Some of those who followed him came up to mark the way, but could not find it. When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: "The place [of the concealment of the Ark] shall be unknown until God gathers His people together again and shows His mercy. And then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that a place should be especially consecrated."¹⁰

This would make perfect sense. Jeremiah was extremely active at the time of the disappearance of the Ark, from the 13th year of King Josiah (626 B.C.) until the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. He was the most famous and venerated prophet of Israel at the time. In addition, he was recognized by all his compatriots as the true vicar of God in their kingdom, the holy prophet whom God had anointed and appointed to transmit his divine commandments to his people. In

¹⁰This version of the Jeremiah tradition comes from 2 Maccabees 2: 4-8. For this purpose, the author consulted the following version of the *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition*. Note well that Maccabees is not a book of the traditional Bible, but rather a book of the Apocrypha.

essence, the prophet Jeremiah was a new Moses; indeed, in his day, he was the most eminent prophet to appear in Israel since the time of Moses: just as Moses had guided his people at the time of the Exodus, so did Jeremiah guide his own people at the time of the Babylonian exile and captivity. Who better or more worthy to guard and to protect the Ark of the Covenant, the holiest object in all the land?

Obviously, God would have chosen his best and wisest prophet for this crucial and vital task. God knew that he could rely only on Jeremiah for this most important undertaking.

A second point corroborating this particular theory is the fact that God never would have tolerated the capture and desecration of the Ark by the Babylonians, given its extraordinary importance in the spiritual communication between Himself and his chosen people. Under these circumstances, God would have used supernatural means, if necessary, in order to protect this ultimate symbol of his power and his goodness and his grace. Never would He have allowed such a holy and powerful shrine to fall into the hands of ignorant heathens. It was God's intention to conceal and to preserve the Ark, as the ultimate symbol of His greatness and His capacity to perform miracles.

In this regard, the reader should remember that the Ark was the holiest religious object in history: it symbolized, perfectly, the wisdom and the infallibility of God's judgment and his infinite capacity for grace and mercy. The Jewish high priest approached the Ark in the Holy of Holies only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Those who approached the Ark invariably faced God's omniscient and infallible judgment; this divine judgment was symbolized by the two golden winged cherubs seated on the lid of the Ark, who had the same faces as the two wrathful sword bearing fiery Angels who barred the return of Adam and Eve to the Garden of Eden after their fall from innocence.

Because all men are imperfect and fall short of the glory of God, the intimidated priest and worshiper who approached the Ark in the Holy of Holies could only survive this inexorable divine judgment by sprinkling the innocent lamb's blood of atonement on the mercy seat above the lid of the Ark. Thus, Yom Kippur was the annual holy

day which served to remind God of his eternal covenant to exercise both judgment and mercy in his dealings with Israel.

Moreover, in this ceremony of Yom Kippur, the reader clearly sees the Ark's purpose as an omen of the advent of the Christ. The Ark represents both the Old Covenant of the Old Testament—made between Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, and God—as well as the New Covenant of the New Testament, represented by the life and resurrection of God's divine Son, Jesus Christ. According to the theology of this New Testament, given that all men are imperfect, only Christ can save a person from eternal punishment for his sins in Hell, through the amazing redemptive power of his grace and infinite love and compassion.

Thus, in a very profound sense, the Cross of Christ has replaced the Ark of the Covenant, as the means by which a person can be saved and can lawfully be admitted to the Kingdom of Heaven. In other words, just as in ancient times, the high priest humbly approached the ark on Yom Kippur, in order to beg God to forgive his wayward people, so do Christians today approach and kneel before the crucifixes, crosses, and Madonnas in their various churches, in order to beg for forgiveness of their own sins and in order to plead for Christ's and God's saving mercy and grace.

Under such circumstances, God never would have permitted the irretrievable loss or destruction of the Ark of the Covenant, given that the Ark is consequently the ultimate symbol of both the Old and the New Covenant between God and Man. The Ark is the holiest and most sacred physical object which can possibly be imagined.

A third cogent point corroborating the belief that it was Jeremiah who hid the Ark from the Babylonians shortly before their invasion of Israel, is the fact that the Jeremiah tradition is the most historically accurate, respectable, and credible theory concerning the disappearance of the Ark. This particular theory is corroborated by a great deal of prestigious scholarship, some of which was done close to the time of the Babylonian captivity and Jeremiah's lifetime, and was thus based on the reports of reliable eye witnesses to the events.

The earliest version of this venerable Jeremiah tradition goes back to the Jewish historian Eupolemus, whose work dates from 157

B.C., and whose words were reported in the Greek historian Alexander Polyhistor's book *On the Jews* (mid-first century B.C.). These words have been preserved for us in a work by Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* (9.39.5). This reads:

“Then he (Nebuchadnezzar), King of Babylon, seized Jerusalem and captured Jonachim the King of the Jews (seemingly a conflation of Jehoiakim, Jehoiahim and Zedekiah). He took as tribute the gold and silver and bronze in the Temple of Solomon and sent them to Babylon, except for the Ark and the tablets of stone in it. This Jeremiah preserved.”¹¹

A fourth strong reason to support the contention that it was the prophet Jeremiah who hid the Ark, is archaeology. There is no stronger historical evidence than archaeological evidence. A famous archaeological expedition has already been conducted to Mount Nebo with the express intent to recover the lost Ark. This particular expedition brought forth surprisingly cogent evidence that Jeremiah had indeed concealed the Ark in a cave beneath this mountain. Let us consider the details of this expedition.

We are referring to the expedition which was led by the American Antonia Frederick Futterer, at the time one of the world's leading collectors of Biblical antiquities. He was convinced that the Ark had not been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C.; his research indicated that, in fact, the Ark had been buried inside Mount Nebo in what is present day Jordan at the time of the Babylonian invasion. Therefore, in the year 1926, Futterer embarked on his first trip to the Holy Land, to prove this fact.

His efforts were well rewarded. “Right under my feet is a cave,” he wrote in his diary while exploring the mountain. “Only a few yards from the very top of Mount Nebo. The mouth of it was stopped up with stones, just like Jeremiah said the lost cave would be.”

¹¹ This particular translation of Eusebius was done by F. Fallon and appears in the following scholarly book: James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983-85), 2: 871. Moreover, this information was discovered in the following work: John Day, “Whatever Happened to the Ark of the Covenant?” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 251.

Most significantly, during the course of this 1926 expedition, Futterer claimed to have discovered a secret passage within Mount Nebo. This passage was blocked by a wall of some sort, and Futterer did not attempt to break it down. He discovered etched upon the wall an ancient inscription, which he faithfully copied and carried back to Jerusalem. There, he contacted an eminent Biblical scholar at the Hebrew University who helpfully deciphered the hieroglyphs. To the amazement of all present that day, the translator read the following uncanny words: "*Herein lies the golden Ark of the Covenant.*"

The translator's solemn pronouncement clearly confirmed the assertion of the prophet Jeremiah that he had hidden the Ark of the Covenant and the Tent of the Tabernacle in a secret cave inside Mount Nebo, for safekeeping.

Curiously, Futterer never named the translator, nor did he reproduce the inscription. Moreover, as surprising as it may seem, he never retraced his steps back to the secret passage on Mount Nebo, in order to retrieve the Ark.¹² Hence, to this day, that passage which was first discovered so long ago, and that mysterious chamber behind the mysterious wall at the end of that passage, remain unexplored.

However, despite Futterer's incomprehensible negligence in failing to consummate his expedition, the reader can clearly see that he was on the right track and that, of all the theories which have been advanced to indicate the present location of the Ark, this particular theory is the most plausible and the most credible. It is corroborated by powerful archaeological evidence, which matches the story of how Jeremiah hid the Ark, recorded in Maccabees. The location of the secret passage found by Futterer in 1926 also matches the location on Mount Nebo to which Jeremiah reportedly took and deposited the Ark at the time of the Babylonian invasion.

The author consequently believes that we have now found the solution to the mystery of what became of the lost Ark of the Covenant. To those sceptics who would retort that Futterer and his colleagues have already undertaken the examination of the summit of Mount Nebo, yet have failed to find the hidden chamber concealing the Ark and the Tent

¹²Hancock, 394.

of the Tabernacle, the author would reply that the Futterer expedition was an undertaking conducted by enthusiastic yet untrained amateurs.

As incredible as it may seem, to the knowledge of historians and Biblical scholars, no serious professional archaeological team has ever gone in search of the Ark of the Covenant. Only well meaning amateurs have done so.¹³ While amateurs might have failed in the past, professional archaeologists with professional high tech equipment exploring Mount Nebo today would possess the professional skill and expertise required to actually locate and recover the lost Ark. Were they to re-discover the secret passage first discovered by Futterer in 1926, and were they to break down that inconvenient wall at the end of that passage, they would probably enter a chamber containing treasures equivalent to those discovered at the time of the discovery of the tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh of the eighteenth dynasty, King Tutankhanum.

Despite the theological fact that the essence of Yahweh is incorpor ineffability and transcendence, and despite His insistence that He is a purely Holy Spirit, rather than a visible idol, men today still do need to see and to revere physical holy objects as they pursue their religious lives. It was for this reason that John Calvin and other theologians of the Reformation in Switzerland and elsewhere attributed such a high degree of importance to the Ark, and it explains why they illustrated their Bibles with so many splendid images of the Ark and the Tent of the Tabernacle. Hence, 500 years after the Reformation, the quest for the lost Ark of the Covenant continues, as it has for millennia.

We should all remember that the Ark represents God's dwelling in the heart of any who love Him as well as an extraordinary opportunity to commune directly with His divine presence. It is a most extraordinary blessing to mankind. This should be reason enough to motivate young archaeologists today to return to Mount Nebo and to seek with ardor the mysteriously lost and fabled Ark of the Covenant.

- Bryan College

¹³Eric H. Cline, *From Eden to Exile: Unraveling Mysteries of the Bible* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2007), 150.