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Finders of the Lost Ark

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Finders of the Lost Ark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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With the publication of this book, Kerry Ross Boren and Lisa Lee Boren have joined a growing list of people of various religious persuasions who claim either to have found the ark of the covenant or to know where it is hidden. What makes these stories hard to accept, among other things, is that they disagree on the location of the ark, some placing it in Europe (Ireland or France), others in Israel, and still others in either Egypt or Ethiopia. Before discussing the Borens’ book, I will provide a brief summary of what is known about the ark from ancient sources and explore other recent speculations regarding it.

Interest in the ark’s location was undoubtedly sparked by the Indiana Jones motion picture *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, in which the Nazis locate the ark in Egypt. Somehow, people find it hard to believe that God would permit the destruction of sacred relics. Over the centuries, this conviction has led to a belief in the preservation of such items as the ark of the covenant, the garments of skin given to Adam and Eve, the cup used at the last supper (the holy grail), the spear that pierced Christ’s side, the “true cross” on which he was crucified, the shroud in which he was buried, and the kerchief with which

Veronica wiped his sweating face as he carried the cross to Calvary, leaving the imprint of his face on the cloth.¹

Can the ark really be hidden somewhere? In order to answer that question, we must review the Bible story. According to 1 Kings 8:1–9 and 2 Chronicles 5:1–10, Solomon placed the ark in his newly constructed temple in Jerusalem. During the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam, the Egyptian king Shishak attacked Jerusalem and carried away the treasures kept in its temple (see 1 Kings 14:25–26; 2 Chronicles 12:9). The ark is not specifically mentioned, leaving us to speculate whether it was taken to Egypt along with the rest of the booty or hidden prior to the arrival of the Egyptian army at Jerusalem.

More than three centuries after the temple's original construction, King Josiah of Judah instituted religious reforms, including instructions to the priests to place the ark in the newly refurbished temple (see 2 Chronicles 35:3). Jeremiah, a contemporary of Josiah, prophesied, “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” (Jeremiah 3:16).

After Jeremiah's time, the Old Testament is silent about the ark. In his days, the Babylonians destroyed the temple and carted off its sacred vessels (see 2 Kings 25:13–17; Jeremiah 52:17–23). But the ark and other implements such as the seven-branched lampstand are not listed among the stolen relics, nor are they included in the list of temple paraphernalia returned to Jerusalem in 537 B.C. by order of the Persian king Cyrus, who had conquered Babylon. Consequently, we do not know what became of the ark of the covenant. Made of wood overlaid with gold (see Exodus 25:10–21), it may have been destroyed or dismantled.²

¹. The name Veronica means "true image," suggesting that she, too, is an invention. But Mark Twain, tongue-in-cheek, wrote in *Innocents Abroad* that he believed the story of Veronica, since he had seen the original kerchief in a number of churches, making the tradition very well authenticated.

². Some would argue that Revelation 11:19 suggests that the ark was taken to heaven, where God preserves it. But John the Revelator was most likely describing a heavenly ark, just as he described a heavenly temple.
Early Traditions about the Hiding of the Ark

Stories about the hiding of the ark go back many centuries. According to the Babylonian Talmud (see Horayot 12a; Kerithot 5b), Josiah, king of Judah, in preparation for the exile prophesied by Moses in Deuteronomy 28:36, hid away the ark, the anointing oil, the jar of manna (see Exodus 16:33), Aaron's rod (see Numbers 17:8), and the coffer sent as a gift by the Philistines when returning the ark to Israel (see 1 Samuel 6:8). Variant stories are also given: the ark was taken to Babylon along with the treasures of the temple (see Yoma 53b), or it was hidden away in the chamber of the woodshed of the temple (see Yoma 54a). Other early Jewish accounts credit the prophet Jeremiah with hiding both the tabernacle and the ark in a cave on Mount Nebo (see 4 Baruch 3:7-19; 2 Maccabees 2:1-8; Chronicles of Jerahmeel 77:4-9; Lives of the Prophets 2:11-19). According to Midrash Rabbah Numbers 15:10 and 2 Baruch 6:7-9, five things from the first temple were absent in the second temple but will be restored in the messianic age; these are the sacred fire, the ark, the menorah or lampstand, the Spirit, and the cherubim. According to Abot de Rabbi Nathan 41, eight things were hidden away, including the ark.

A medieval Hebrew document, Massekhet Kelim ("Tractate of the Vessels"), describes how the vessels of the Jerusalem temple were hidden away when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 587 B.C., indicating that some of the Levites prepared a list of the vessels and their hiding places on a copper tablet. One is readily reminded of the Copper Scroll, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, that has a similar list.

Early Christian traditions attribute the hiding of the ark to Simeon, who was high priest at the time of the Babylonian destruction of the temple (see Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan IV, 10.16-17; Book of the Rolls folio 137a). The Samaritans also have traditions about hiding the temple relics, this time on Mount Gerizim.

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3. The oldest copy of the text was rediscovered in the genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo just over a century ago.
4. See the discussion in John A. Tvedtnes, The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 112-13. I have since learned that Vendyl Jones (see text below) has also discussed this tie.
5. The various Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan accounts are discussed in ibid., 119-21.
Other stories suggest that the ark was concealed outside the land of Israel. An early Irish tradition maintains that the ark is buried at Tara, Ireland, having been brought from Jerusalem by the prophet Jeremiah in company with two of the daughters of King Zedekiah of Jerusalem. Another very early tradition known from the thirteenth-century Ethiopian *Kebranagast* reports that Menelik, Solomon’s son by the queen of Sheba, brought the ark to his homeland, where it is still said to reside in the Church of Saint Mary at Axum, the former capital of the kingdom of Abyssinia (Ethiopia). The idea of an Ethiopian hiding place for the ark was popularized in a book written by British journalist Graham Hancock, *The Sign and the Seal*, and a number of others have followed the same path.

### The Modern Search for the Ark

Religious zeal seems to lie behind some of the ark discovery stories. But I know of at least one televangelist who doesn’t give credence to the stories, though he expresses great interest in rebuilding the ark. I watched as he implored his flock to contribute money for the project. Citing the fact that the Lord did not come down to the tabernacle until after Moses had placed the ark therein, he insisted that Christ’s second coming could not take place until the ark had been rebuilt. Paraphrasing a line from the motion picture *Field of Dreams*, he emphatically intoned, “If you build it, He will come!”

Some devoutly religious people have no interest in rebuilding the ark, however, being persuaded that the original ark is surely hidden somewhere safe. Former Israeli Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren and Rabbi Yehuda Getz claim it is hidden beneath the ancient Temple Mount in

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7. In Christian lore, Mary is often compared to the ark because she carried in her womb Jesus Christ, who brought the new covenant to replace the old covenant inscribed on the tablets that Moses had placed in the ark.

Jerusalem and have led an effort to dig through to its long-buried hiding place. These efforts have enraged local Muslims who own the site.

Ron Wyatt—Knows All, Discovers All

Ron Wyatt, a fundamentalist Protestant with no archaeological training, claimed to have found the ark in the so-called Jeremiah's Grotto outside the north wall of the Old City of Jerusalem. He produced extremely blurred photos of a yellow object that cannot be identified as either the ark or anything else made of gold. I possess a videotape produced by Wyatt in which he reveals not only what he claims is the “ark,” but also some of his other discoveries, such as the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, the real Mount Sinai (replete with the original altar constructed by Moses), and parts of Pharaoh’s chariots at the bottom of the Red Sea. However, the destroyed cities are no more than loess deposits eroded by runoff from seasonal rains to form deep arroyos in and around Masada beside the Dead Sea. Even someone like me with a minimal background in geology can see that they are not ruined cities. The “chariot wheels” at the bottom of the Red Sea are of two types: one is a common coral formation that I have often seen while snorkeling in the area, while the other (of which there is a single example) is a shiny metal wheel from a modern ship.

A large number of people (including some Latter-day Saints) give credence to Wyatt’s identification of Jebel al-Lawz in the northwestern Arabian peninsula as the mountain atop which Moses received the tablets of the law. While I reject some of Wyatt’s supporting evidence, the site is a plausible candidate. Still, I have to wonder about a man who, though untrained in archaeology, claims to have made so many astounding discoveries. I am particularly skeptical of his story of having discovered a pillar erected by Solomon on the western shore of the Arabian peninsula to commemorate the Israelite...
crossing of the Red Sea. Wyatt claimed that it was there during his first (admittedly illegal) visit to that region but was removed by the Saudis and replaced with a thin metal pole, which he videotaped during his second (again illegal) visit. Since Wyatt was not trained in any of the ancient or modern languages of the region, one wonders how he could have known who erected the supposed column or what it was supposed to commemorate.

Michael Sanders, Qualified but Speculative

British archaeologist Michael Sanders has traced the history of the ark and also believes that he has located the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah beneath the waters of the Dead Sea. He begins with the assumption that most scholars agree there never was a pharaoh named Shishak; he then identifies this as the Hebrew name given an Egyptian king and says that it is not an Egyptian name at all. To be sure, it is not an Egyptian name, but it is also not a Hebrew name. Most scholars believe that the Shishak of the Bible is the Egyptian king Shoshenk or Sheshonk, part of the twenty-second Dynasty that controlled Egypt. Sanders says that the identification is impossible because the vowels are different, ignoring the fact that vowels were added only to later copies of the Hebrew Bible. (Egyptian vowels are also uncertain.)

Relying on the fact that the Bible mentions only Shishak's attack on the kingdom of Judah to the south and notes nothing about an attack on the northern kingdom of Israel, Sanders suggests that Shishak must be Ramses III, the only Egyptian king (according to him) who attacked just the south but not the north. (In fact, the name Sheshonk was discovered on part of a broken monument at Megiddo in northern Israel.) For some reason, he never considers that the authors of the Bible, who lived in the kingdom of Judah, might not have

11. Sanders prepared two one-hour programs, one on the ark of the covenant and one on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which were aired on NBC during April 2001, under the title "Biblical Mysteries." His Mysteries of the Bible Web site is at bible mysteries.com; there one can find lectures on these topics (i.e., biblemysteries.com/lectures/gomorrah and biblemysteries.com/lectures/shishak).
cared what Shishak did to their enemies to the north. Sanders's omission of facts suggests that he doesn't have a grasp of historiography.

Sanders's next step is to note that reliefs in the mortuary temple of Ramses III at Medinet Habu in Egypt depict various gold boxes being carried about by poles, one of them surmounted (after a couple of lines of hieroglyphic text) by a winged solar disk, which Sanders sees as the wings of the cherubim atop the ark of the covenant. Again, however, he neglects to mention that other Egyptian temples depict similar sacred boxes and that, in fact, the ark of the covenant is thought by many scholars to have been patterned after the Egyptian arks, which were carried by means of poles hefted by priests. Though he never acknowledges it, Sanders is merely following in the steps of Immanuel Velikovsky, who proposed in 1952 that it was the Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose II (whom Velikovsky identified as the biblical Shishak) who carried the ark and other temple implements from Jerusalem to Egypt. Velikovsky relied on the Ethiopic tradition when he identified the queen of Sheba with Thutmose II's predecessor, Hatshepsut. Just as Velikovsky believed that Hatshepsut's mortuary temple at Deir al-Bahri was patterned after Solomon's temple, Sanders believes that the Jerusalem temple was the pattern for Ramses III's temple.¹²

Returning to Sanders's proposal, we next find him referring to Papyrus Harris, which mentions that Ramses III built a temple outside Egypt at a place called dhy of Canaan. Sanders suggests that there would be no reason for an Egyptian king to build a temple outside his homeland unless it was intended to house sacred implements—in this case, the ark and other treasures of the temple. Sanders identifies dhy with the Palestinian village of Dahariyah, south of Hebron. He has located an ancient wall that may date to Bible times. Soundings at one corner suggest a hollow beneath the wall that may be an Egyptian foundation deposit, which, Sanders believes, contains not the ark but the two stone tablets of the law that had been removed from the ark.

At least Sanders acknowledges that the ark itself may no longer exist and that it was probably melted down for its gold. I am inclined

to concur with this conclusion, although I need to see some evidence before I can concede that the tablets of the law are buried in the village of Dahariyah.

The one thing that militates against Sanders's theory that the Egyptian king Shishak took the ark is, as noted earlier, the fact that the ark is mentioned three centuries later, in the time of the prophet Jeremiah. One could argue that this was a replacement ark and not the one constructed in Moses' day, but it is simply impossible to ascertain the truth.

Vendyl Jones

Although Ron Wyatt is no longer with us, his spirit lives on in Vendyl Jones, a former Baptist pastor with strong Jewish leanings. He claims to be the model on which Indiana Jones was patterned for the movies, though the producers deny it. He also asserts that he not only knows where the ark of the covenant is hidden but has also found other materials formerly used in the Jerusalem temple, such as the sacred anointing oil and the incense. These are said to have been uncovered in a cave in the area where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Jones has been following clues left in the Copper Scroll found in Cave 3, which purports to list the burial sites of various writings and treasures from the temple. While many believe the text to be fictional, a number of scholars have suggested that the description of the items and their whereabouts re-

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13. Two of Jones's five children are said to have converted to Judaism and are living in Israel.
14. In an article published in the Texas Monthly of August 1992 and entitled "Masquerader of the Lost Ark," journalist Mark Seal reported that Jones claimed that the nickname Indy for the motion picture character was derived from Vendyl by dropping the first and last letters, giving the form Endy. Seal notes that George Lucas has gone on record as saying that the name was taken from Lucas's dog Indiana, who was with him when he wrote the original story in 1973.
15. Jones has made other assertions that most scholars find unacceptable, including his claim to know where the ashes of the red heifer were hidden and his identification of what he believes to be the correct location of the ancient site of Gilgal.
late to the temple in Jerusalem rather than to the Qumran area. Only time will tell if Jones is on to something.  

Meanwhile, because he lacks formal training in archaeology, the Israel Antiquities Authority has prohibited Jones from excavating in the region. For a time, Jones continued his work under the guise of "geological" rather than archaeological work, though he is also not a trained geologist. He was recently expelled from the site because he brought in heavy equipment that has damaged the area.

Enter the Borens

But who needs Vendyl "Indy" Jones when we have Kerry and Lisa Boren to set us straight and tell us that the ark is actually located in Utah’s Sanpete County? No need to travel to the Middle East or Africa; it is right in our own backyard!

Actually, the Borens do more than tell us about the ark of the covenant; chapter titles in their book include "The Secret of Temple Hill," "The Secret of Sanpete," and "The Sanpete Sanctuary." The Borens also discuss the golden fleece of Greek mythology, the famous Oak Island mystery, the Welsh Prince Madoc and his reputed voyage to the New World, and the "New Atlantis"; they even appropriate the title of Hancock’s book The Sign and the Seal as the title of one of their chapters (though it has nothing to do with Hancock’s work). The strange nature of the Boren book is exemplified by the facts that they credit Jason, the hero of Greek mythology who sought the golden fleece, with having built a temple on the spot where the Manti Utah Temple now stands and that they assert that Prince Madoc (who they claim was a Knight Templar) later became king of the Aztecs and constructed another temple on the same hill. All this is rolled together with the Greek mythological accounts of the garden of the Hesperides and King Midas.

Like other typical seekers of the lost ark, the Borens are really treasure hunters and have produced two previous books about the

16. Jones claims to have had the support of former Israeli Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, though Goren has publicly spoken about the ark being hidden beneath the Temple Mount in Jerusalem rather than in the Dead Sea region where Jones has done his work.
“lost Rhoades mine,” to which they return in this latest book as well (chapters 14–16). Chapter 2 discusses the claim of John Brewer to have discovered caves behind the Manti Temple hill during the 1960s, where he found mummies, stone boxes, and metal plates.17 In an online discussion of their book, whose original title was to have been The Treasure of God: Solving the Mystery of Sanpete Valley, Utah (the current subtitle), the Borens talk about Brewer’s “discoveries.” Their description is accompanied by photographs of some of the Brewer plates, but one photograph happens to show one of the fraudulent Padilla gold plates from Mexico.18

In a series of pedigree charts in the latter part of the book, the Borens trace the lineage of the various monarchs and Knights Templar, who supposedly had possession of the ark, down to Latter-day Saint Bishop Isaac Morley, who settled Sanpete County. And guess what—Kerry Boren is listed as a descendant of the Prophet Joseph Smith and Morley’s daughter Lucy Diantha. Boren does not note, however, his present residence, which is the Utah State Penitentiary, where he was sent after the 1983 beating death of his first wife, Elvia.

When the infamous Salamander Letter came to the fore in 1984–85, some anti-Mormons immediately proclaimed it as evidence that Joseph Smith was involved in the occult. D. Michael Quinn even used it as the premise for some of his thinking in his book Early Mormonism and the Magic World View,19 now in its second edition. But

17. Brewer’s story is told in more detail in chapter 1 of Stephen B. Shaffer, Treasures of the Ancients, which was published by the Borens’ publisher, Cedar Fort, in 1996. Shaffer discusses a number of such finds that are considered fraudulent by archaeologists, including the Padilla plates from Mexico and the Michigan mound tablets that were regarded as frauds by Elder James E. Talmage in 1911. For a discussion of Talmage’s findings, see “James E. Talmage and the Fraudulent ‘Michigan Relics,’” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 7/1 (1998): 78.


one well-known critic of the church, Jerald Tanner, was convinced from the start that the document was a forgery. He believed it had been fabricated by none other than Kerry Ross Boren. As it turned out, Tanner was wrong in this identification; Mark Hofmann turned out to be the forger and, worse yet, a murderer. His current address is the same as Boren’s.

On the back cover of the Borens’ book, we find a brief biographical sketch of Kerry but no mention of Lisa Lee Wallgren Boren, whom he married in 1986 after being incarcerated. He carefully omits any reference to his criminal behavior and suggests that he is a renowned author and researcher who even “assisted Alex Haley with research on his books Roots and Queen.” Unfortunately, Haley has passed away, so we cannot verify this claim. Boren notes that he has “published articles in many periodicals,” some of them with “the National Center and Association for Outlaw and Lawman History” (back cover), which, according to his Web site (oboran.com), he founded. That seems fitting, as is his claim to have “worked on many films” as a consultant, “including Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and Against a Crooked Sky,” and—again according to his Web site—to have been a contributor to Robert Redford’s book The Outlaw Trail.

Now, maybe Boren really was involved with all these things and the others he lists, but my concern is with his investigation into the whereabouts of the ark of the covenant. I categorically reject this and other attempts to demonstrate that its location—if it still exists—is known. Should you purchase and read this book? Will you find any truth in it? Perhaps, but even if you find its claims outrageous, you can at least take consolation in the fact that you may have contributed to Boren’s legal defense fund. Or if you just enjoy reading fantasy, this book is for you.

20. Jerald Tanner, Mr. Boren and the White Salamander (Salt Lake City: Utah Light-house Ministry, 1985). The reader can consult some of Jerald Tanner’s comments on Kerry Ross Boren’s claims (including possession of some of the mummies and Egyptian documents formerly owned by Joseph Smith) by going to utlm.org/navnewsletters.htm and entering a search on “Boren.”
An Afterthought

It is possible, of course, that God has preserved the ark of the covenant, but to what purpose? The apostle Paul wrote that the law of Moses was "a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ" (Colossians 2:17). This is precisely the view given in Hebrews 9–10 of the tabernacle, the ark, and the other implements of worship made by Israel in the time of Moses. "For the law [of Moses] having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect" (Hebrews 10:1). That perfection comes through Christ, who brought a "new covenant" (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 8:8–13; 10:16; 12:24), written "not in tables of stone [kept in the ark of the covenant], but in fleshy tables of the heart" (2 Corinthians 3:3).