

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

THEODORE D. EHRLICH

One of the great mysteries of the Bible is the disappearance of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. The Ark is mentioned as being placed in the First Temple (I Kgs. 8:3-8), but does not appear in the dedication ceremony of the Second Temple (Ezra 3). The Talmud (TB *Yoma* 22b) notes that the Ark was one of the five items that were in the First Temple, but not in the Second Temple. The Bible does not mention who removed the Ark, why the Ark was removed, where it was moved, when it was taken, and, finally, how this was achieved. It simply disappears from the biblical narrative. It would be anachronistic to expect the biblical writers to function as investigative reporters; however, their silence on this subject is startling. It is the equivalent of Sherlock Holmes' "the dog that didn't bark."

For the Jews, the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord is the most sacred object imaginable, containing the handiwork of God, and yet there is little mention of its history after being placed in Solomon's Temple. The cross for Christians, the black stone for Muslims, and the Ark for Jews are physical objects central to their religious cults. To briefly review, the Ark was made of acacia wood, overlaid with gold, and measured two and a half cubits by one and a half cubits by one and a half cubits (Ex. 25:10), roughly 45 inches by 27 inches by 27 inches. Within it were the Ten Commandments written by God and broken by Moses, and the second set of commandments dictated by God and inscribed by Moses. A pot of manna and Aaron's rod may also have been in the Ark (Ex. 16:33, Num. 17:25). The Ark was covered by the golden *kapporet*, which was adorned with two golden cherubs. The Ark was God's way of relating to man; it was from there that communication from God would emanate (Ex. 25:22). The Ark and *kapporet* were the only objects in the Holy of Holies, and the high priest would enter this inner sanctum only one day a year, on Yom Kippur.

The disappearance of the Ark is generally considered related to the sacking of the Temple, and the primary historical figures responsible for its disappearance would thus include Pharaoh Shishaq, King Jehoash of Israel, and

Theodore D. Ehrlich, M.D., is a doctor in private practice in Los Angeles.

Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia, although the Bible does not state that any of these figures took the Ark.

None of these rulers is the likely culprit. Pharaoh Shishaq *marched against Jerusalem and carried off the treasures of the House of the Lord* (I Kgs. 14:25-26). The Bible does not state that he breached the wall or invaded the Temple, so in all probability he was bribed with treasure to leave the land without entering or assaulting Jerusalem. King Jehoash of Israel breached the wall of Jerusalem to a breadth of 400 cubits, and *he carried off all the gold and silver and all the vessels that were in the House of the Lord* (II Kgs. 14:13-14). The Bible says nothing of his removal of the Ark, which is most strange. Israel was in part unstable because it lacked the temple theology of Jerusalem – the sacred Ark and the cause for pilgrimages three times a year. Would not Jehoash have endeavored to retrieve the Ark and place it back in the temple of Shiloh or possibly in Bethel or Dan? This act would have enhanced his power among his priesthood and the people of Israel, yet no mention is made of such an action. We are told that Jehoash took back hostages who were held in Jerusalem and palace treasures (II Kgs. 14:14), but nothing is mentioned of the far more significant Ark of the Covenant. This paper proposes that by then the Ark was no longer in the Holy of Holies and had previously been removed or destroyed. That being the case, possible evildoers such as Manasseh and Nebuchadnezzar could not be guilty owing to the simple fact that they came after the Ark's disappearance.

If external invaders were not responsible, internal malefactors must be considered. Solomon placed the Ark in the Temple upon its completion in 956 BCE. We read: *The priests brought the Ark of the Lord's Covenant to the place underneath the wings of the cherubim in the Shrine of the House, in the Holy of Holies* (I Kgs, 8:6). Solomon announced to the congregation, *I have built the House for the name of the Lord, the God of Israel, and have set a place there for the Ark, containing the covenant which the Lord made with our fathers when He brought them out from the land of Egypt* (I Kgs. 8:20, 21). Subsequent monarchs of Judah, prior to the conquest of Jerusalem by Jehoash of Israel, were Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, Ahaziah, Athaliah, Joash, and Amaziah. All these rulers were worshippers of God, with the notable exception of Athaliah, the daughter of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who married Jehoram, the king of Judah. When Jehoram

died, Athaliah's son Ahaziah ruled for one year only. While on a visit to his uncle Jehoram, the king of Israel, Ahaziah and his uncle were assassinated by Jehu, the Israelite commander, who had been encouraged by the ardent Elisha to initiate a coup d'état. Jehu proceeded with a vengeance, killing Athaliah's sons, mother, brothers, and nephews, and also killing government loyalists and Baalist elements in Israel. Now a historic switch occurred. Jehu promoted the God agenda in the kingdom of Israel, which had previously practiced a syncretic religion, while Athaliah promoted Baalist practices in Judah. Despite being the only woman to rule in Israel or Judah, and despite her worship of Baal, she was able to maintain power for six turbulent years (842-836 BCE). Her most notorious act was to destroy all members of the house of David with the exception of her grandson Joash, who was hidden away. Amazingly, with the overt near-destruction of the Davidic line, no rebellion occurred. After her attempted massacre of the Davidic line, her next likely action would have been an attack on the Israelite religion. She was a devoted follower of Baal, and Jehu had murdered her sons, mother and other family members. Would it not be all too human to seek revenge? The royal palace had direct access to the Temple complex. In the dead of night, with the aid of Baalist elements, the secret destruction and removal of all significant religious objects would not have been an insurmountable problem.

Some time during or after the reign of Athaliah, it is surmised by this writer that the high priest of Jerusalem and his entourage became aware of Athaliah's vile deed, but what recourse was available to them? Informing the community would reflect badly on them and on the religion. Why did the priesthood not defend the Ark? How could God allow this to happen? Would not acknowledging the Ark's disappearance undermine the priesthood and the Temple's sanctity? The only prudent course of action was to maintain the religious practices as if nothing had changed. Only the high priest entered the Holy of Holies, and he would remain silent. The rituals continued as before, but without the presence of the Ark, a practice continued in Second Temple times as well (Mishnah *Yoma* 5:2).

When Jehoash captured the Temple in 786 BCE, he too would have prudently refrained from acknowledging the Ark's disappearance, for fear of religious repercussions. This dark secret continued throughout the Bible, and finally Jeremiah declared: *men shall no longer speak of the Ark of the Cove-*

nant, nor shall it come to mind. They shall not mention it, or miss it, or make another (Jer. 3:16). Earlier in the same chapter (3:6) Jeremiah affirmed, *The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah*, his statement thus predating the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 and 586 BCE. Jeremiah's declaration that no Ark would be made in the future implies that he knew the Ark was no longer in existence, even before Nebuchadnezzar's desecration of the Temple. Jeremiah, a prophet belonging to the priestly line, most likely shared the secrets of Temple history and past events.

The Bible's last mention of the Ark of the Covenant is in Second Chronicles. In the year 622 BCE, Josiah told the Levites to *put the Holy Ark in the House that Solomon, son of David, king of Israel built* (II Chron. 35:3). Josiah then sought to reawaken "the national desire to be free of foreign domination."¹ In order to do so, he renovated the Temple, discovered a lost scroll (Deuteronomy?) and referred to the Holy Ark. At no time was the Ark physically presented to the nation, hence its existence could not be substantiated. There is no report of the Ark being brought anywhere, only Josiah's instruction to the Levites. This gave people the impression that the Ark was still in the Temple, when in fact it was long gone. Temple renovation would not give laborers access to the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest might enter – and he kept the secret. It is also significant that in the parallel account of the Temple's renovation (II Kgs. 23) there is no mention whatsoever of the Ark or even of the injunction to place it in the Temple. Josiah's order, to *put the Holy Ark in the House that Solomon, son of David, king of Israel built*, has long struck commentators as unusual: had the Ark been removed during the process of renovation, it should clearly have been restored to its rightful place once the work was complete and there was no need for a special order to do so.² We now understand that this command was issued to create the impression that the Ark was indeed in the Temple, even though it was not.

The belief in a hidden Ark took root in Jewish literature. According to Second Maccabees (2:4-8), Jeremiah managed to conceal it. However, the Book of Maccabees was written over 400 years after Jeremiah's time, and the idea that he hid the Ark is contradicted by his own statement that men should not mention it, miss it or make another (Jer. 3:16). Furthermore, Maccabees forms part of the Apocrypha and therefore possesses less validity than the book of Jeremiah. 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. Maimonides (*Hilkhot Beit ha-Behirah* 4:1) accepts the tradition that King Josiah hid the Ark. However, as historical proof, traditions presented by the Sages are lacking. The Talmud was written centuries after the reign of King Josiah and since concealment of the Ark is not supported by detailed evidence, this assertion is only a tradition. Indeed, the Talmud itself records two possibilities regarding its fate, indicating that there was no real proof of either claim.

Finally, and most telling of all, we have the statement that *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 Chron. 24:7). What sacred things does this refer to? Would Baalists (children of the wicked Athaliah) respect the Ark and *kapporet* after their kinfolk had been slaughtered by Jehu and the temples of Baal were destroyed? The likelihood that Athaliah and her coreligionists would have spared the *sacred things* – the Ark and *kapporet* – defies all logic and human emotion. Judaism, bereft of the Ark, would thus proceed from sacred *things* to ethical monotheism, free from any need to revere physical objects.

NOTES

1. Norman Gelb, *Kings of the Jews: The Origins of the Jewish Nation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008) p. 132.
2. See the commentary to this verse in Yehuda Keel, *Da'at Mikra – Sefer Divrei ha-Yamim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1986) p. 918.