

# The Lost Ark

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

So many people love conspiracy theories, fantasies, and lost causes. Best-selling books and movies focus on myths of missing people, cities, and treasures such as Atlantis, Treasure Island. And going further back in time, to the Golden Fleece or the Ten Lost Tribes. Christianity of course is the champion of fantasies and relics. For centuries they searched for the Holy Cross. Enough pieces of wood were found to launch a whole armada. Or the nails used in the Crucifixion, to build a battleship. The Holy Grail has retained its grip on the imagination. Of course, we have ours too. The Menorah from the Second Temple that can be seen in Titus's arch, was carried off to Rome. Some are still convinced it is hidden in the Vatican vaults despite the number of times Rome was ransacked. Anything of value was shipped off or melted down. But pride of place in the realms of myth goes to the 'lost' Holy Ark of the Covenant. Of which we read from the Torah this month. Forgetting Hollywood's obsession, its disappearance has fascinated people for thousands of years.

The details of the Ark's construction can be found in several chapters in the Book of Exodus, starting with Chapter 25. God commands Moses to "make an Ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high. Overlay it with pure gold inside and out, make a gold molding roundabout. ....And deposit in it the tablets of the Covenant which I will give you. You shall make a cover of pure gold, two and a half cubits long and a cubit and a half wide." On top there were .. "two cherubim of beaten gold facing each other from opposite ends."

The Ark disappeared at some point during the First Temple era, which ended in 586 BCE with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The Temple was sacked on several occasions even earlier. In 926 BCE, King Shishak of Egypt took the treasuries of the Temple and the royal house of Rehoboam (I Kings 14:25-26). In 786 BCE, King Jehoshaphat of Israel attacked his former ally, King Amaziah of Judah. He seized the gold and silver from the Temple and the royal house and took that booty back to Samaria (II Kings 14:13-14). There is no mention of the Ark in the list of spoils taken from the Temple by the Chaldeans to Babylonia ( II Kings 25:13-17; Jeremiah 52:17-23). In none of these cases does the Bible say that the Ark was taken. And even if it had been it would make no sense to cart off the solid wooden structure. Anything made of gold would have been melted down for easier transport.

Had the Ark still been in its usual place when the Babylonians conquered the Temple Mount, they surely would have seized this most valuable and holy possession. But the myth of the missing Ark continued. II Maccabees claims that Jeremiah hid the Ark in a cave on Mount Nebo, Moses' final resting place. The precise location of which is unknown.

The Talmud (Yoma 53b) contains lots of theories. Rabbi Judah said that the Ark was hidden in a subterranean chamber beneath the Holy of Holies by King Josiah. And several priests died when they accidentally discovering the exact spot and flames shot out and consumed them.

Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai said that the Ark was taken to Babylonia at the time of Jechoniah's capture and exile (608 BCE). You might get confused over who Jechoniah was if you read the Bible because he was also known as Coniah and Jehoiachin. And incidentally, according to II Kings 25:27, thirty-seven years after the exile, he was released from prison by King Evil Merodach, welcomed to court, and made the official leader of the Judean community in Babylon

The Talmud also quotes Josiah's instructions to the Levites when he restored the Temple after the idolatrous reigns of Manasseh and Amon, to return the Ark to the Holy of Holies. (II Chronicles 35:3). But there is no evidence that he did, possibly probably because it no longer existed. While other Temple vessels were replaced when necessary, both in the first and the second Temples, the Ark is never mentioned again.

Some people have suggested that this was because while winged Cherubim in the context of Mesopotamian religions represented a higher, heavenly presence, by the second Temple, the authorities feared that the cherubs might be mistaken for idols. And anyway, the Stone Tablets of the Covenant were no longer to found, so that its symbolism was lost forever. Although even earlier, according to the Bible, King Hezekiah had destroyed the Bronze Serpent on a Staff mentioned in the Torah and the Books of Magical Cures, because simple people were worshipping them in idolatrous fashion.

According to the Talmud (Yoma 52b), there was no Ark in the Second Temple which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. But even if there had been or it was buried under the temple foundations, after the Second Destruction in 70 CE the Romans razed the Temple Mount to its foundations and there is no ark on the Arch of Titus. Either way, the original Ark disappeared and was never seen again. And there is not an ounce of logic to suggest that it was spirited away to darkest Africa or the Andes. Why therefore on earth would one think it must still exist?

Still, fantasies sell, both religions and entertainment. Myths often have very important messages. So, what possibly could be the message of stories of the Lost Ark? To start with, from the Babylonian exile there was always a dream that eventually the House of David would return and rebuild Jerusalem and The Temple. It was revived with the Second Destruction as a powerful story of hope for the exiles. To this day rebuilding the Temple remains a powerful dream for many. All the more so, since Christianity claimed that the Temple and sacrifices were now redundant and symbols of an Old Covenant that had been replaced by a New One. The "stubborn Jews" were not going to give up their ideas until a Messiah came who really would bring peace on Earth.

For me, the Ark is a symbol of how religions develop over time and are modified both by internal and external forces. But it also illustrates how whatever mistakes or disasters we inflict upon ourselves, there is always a future to look forward to. Looking back is only helpful if it enables us to go forward. The idea of sacrifices or even a rebuilt Temple does not excite me. But hope is a powerful and therapeutic emotion. And to think that we are the heirs to a tradition that goes back so many thousands of years and once included little cherubs on an Ark is a powerful incentive for wanting to see that tradition flourish and survive.