



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text

Exodus 25:10-22

Topic

God instructs Moses to build the Ark of the Covenant to be a container for the tablets of the Ten Commandments

Title

"Ark My Words"

It was the summer of 1981. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was the blockbuster movie. Its twelve minute opening is still considered to be one of the greatest action sequences of any film.

Remember the guy covered with spiders? **They were real tarantulas.** During filming the spiders, all males, wouldn't move after being placed on his body, frustrating director Steven Spielberg who thought they looked fake. The crew's spider wrangler solved the problem by adding one female to mix. The actor, Alfred Molina, recalled, "They're running onto my face and Steven is going, 'Shoot! Shoot!... Alfred, look scared!' and [I'm all], 'I'm scared! I'm scared!'"

While Indy was busy trying to find and save the Ark from the Nazi's, a group of archaeologists in the real world did discover a Lost Ark. Eric and Carol Myers made the discovery in Nabratein in the upper Galilee. It caused a temporary worldwide sensation.

It wasn't the lost Ark of the Covenant. It was a fragment from what is called a Synagogue Ark - a chest that holds the scrolls in the local synagogues in which Jews worshipped.

Has anyone found the lost Ark of the Covenant? If so, where is it?

Before we answer, we should talk about *what* it is. The human race first encountered it in our verses in Exodus twenty-five, when Moses was given plans for its construction.

I'll organize my comments about it around two points: #1 You Get A First Look At The Ark of the Covenant, and #2 You Go Looking For The Lost Ark of the Covenant.

#1 You Get A First Look
At The Ark of the Covenant

It turns out 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' wasn't so far off about the Nazis.

That's the title of a 2017 book review in the Washington Post. The book is *Hitler's Monsters: A Supernatural History of the Third Reich*.

It's author, Eric Kurlander, professor of history at Stetson University, documents facts like some Nazi leaders firmly believed

that the Aryan race descended from the aliens who established Atlantis.

SS officer Otto Rahn was obsessed with finding the "Holy Grail," the so-called cup Jesus drank from at the Last Supper.

Hitler was particularly interested in finding the spear that pierced Jesus' side - sometimes called the "Spear of Destiny."

The Nazis believed these objects would, first of all, reinforce their claims of supremacy; and, second of all, unleash mystical powers that would devastate the Allied Forces.

The Nazis didn't find the Holy Grail, or the Spear of Destiny. Neither did they find the Ark of the Covenant. It's not sitting in a crate, in a vast government warehouse as portrayed in the Indiana Jones films.

Here in Exodus as God gives Moses the pattern for the Tabernacle - He starts with the Ark, and moves out from there.

Exo 25:10 "And they shall make an ark of acacia wood; two and a half cubits *shall be* its length, a cubit and a half its width, and a cubit and a half its height.

Think of it as a wooden chest. In Exodus, its name is "Ark" or "Ark of the Testimony." In the book of Numbers the Ark is given another name - the "Ark of the Covenant" (10:33 & 14:44). Further on, in the book of First Samuel, it is called the "Ark of God" (4:11,13,17,19,21,& 22).

“They shall make an Ark” refers to the chief artisan over the construction of the Tabernacle, a guy named Bezalel; and another artisan named Aholiab. They received the plans from Moses, who received the plans from God.

It’s a good place to bring to our remembrance that we, too, are considered builders. The first apostles are said to have laid the foundation of the church. In Ephesians we read that the church is a “household... having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.” (5:19-22).

As we serve in the Lord’s household of faith, in the church, we are to build appropriately. Here is what the apostle Paul said:

1Co 3:12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw,

1Co 3:13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is.

1Co 3:14 If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward.

1Co 3:15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Think of yourself as a gifted artisan, building according to the pattern revealed to us by the life of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

I want to give credit to a book I’d recommend by Don Stewart, *In Search of the Lost Ark*. Some of the factual descriptions of the Ark itself I am quoting directly from that book.

Acacia wood is strong and durable and resists insects and rot. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, renders this word as “incorruptible” wood or “decay proof” wood. The wood is very light and hard and it does not absorb moisture.

The Ark was “covered with gold,” inside and out. This probably means that hammered plates of gold were attached to the wood by means of small nails. But it could be some type of gold application we are unaware of.

God gave its dimensions in cubits - which means we don't really know *exactly* how big it was. The cubit was measured from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger.

There is no agreement as to the exact length of the cubit.

The various estimates range from as little as fourteen inches to as much as twenty-four inches. My ‘cubit’ measures 19 1/8”. Using an average eighteen-inch cubit, the Ark would have been 3’ 9” long, 2’ 3” wide, and 2’ 3” high.

Exo 25:11 And you shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and out you shall overlay it, and shall make on it a molding of gold all around.

In addition to the gold overlay, there was a molding, or a border, of gold all around it. Honestly, no one knows what that means; not exactly.

The more we read, the more we see that there are a lot of details we cannot be 100% certain of. It seems that God gave the general plan to Moses, but that he, Bezalel, and Aholiab were directed by the Holy Spirit as the Ark was being fashioned.

Later in Exodus God will say, “I have placed wisdom within every skilled craftsman in order to make all that I have commanded you” (31:6-7).

Unless you actually saw the original Ark, you could not reproduce it; and that’s why there are so many different representations of it.

Exo 25:12 You shall cast four rings of gold for it, and put *them* in its four corners; two rings *shall be* on one side, and two rings on the other side.

Exo 25:13 And you shall make poles *of* acacia wood, and overlay them with gold.

Exo 25:14 You shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, that the ark may be carried by them.

Exo 25:15 The poles shall be in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it.

The Ark had four golden rings, two on each side. There were two poles made of acacia wood. These poles were covered with gold and were permanently inserted into the rings for the Ark’s transporting.

Artists who draw the Ark always assume the poles ran lengthwise, but it is entirely possible they ran parallel to the shorter ends.

One takeaway from all this is that ministry can look different. Think of the writers of the New Testament. James and John were very different in their tone; yet both ministered the same Gospel.

People sometimes get confused as to why there are so many churches. They assume it is a bad thing. It’s not; it’s a good thing - **a God thing.**

We are told to worship God in Spirit and in truth, but there is no one, set way of doing that. We are free so long as we do not act unbiblically.

Exo 25:16 And you shall put into the ark the Testimony which I will give you.

The “Testimony” referred to the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed (Exodus 24:12).

Regarding the tablets of the Ten Commandments, I learned something interesting. The Ten Commandments were written on two stone tablets. This probably means **two copies**.

Don Stewart writes,

The reason for having two copies of the Ten Commandments has only recently been understood. When a written covenant was made in the world of the Bible, each party making the covenant had a copy of its contents. If the covenant was between two nations, the two copies would be kept far apart, in the temple of the god of each land. In Israel, though, the covenant was between God and His people. **Both copies of the Ten Commandments were kept in the Ark.**

Exo 25:17 "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits *shall be* its length and a cubit and a half its width.

The Mercy Seat was the lid of the Ark. Though separate articles, they went together. The Bible sometimes uses the term “Ark” when referring to *both* the Ark and the Mercy Seat.

“Mercy seat” is not a good translation. No one sat there! The basic meaning of the Hebrew word *kapporeth* is “to cover.” One translator calls it “the atonement cover.”

A language scholar wrote, “The verb that lies behind the noun... in the expression [mercy seat] means *to ransom or deliver by means of a substitute*.” It was named after its function - to receive the blood of an innocent substitute in order to deliver the offerer from sin so that he or she might approach God.

Since it was a representation of God’s mercy in not giving sinners the death they deserved, later translators called it the mercy seat, and that is still its popular name today.

Exo 25:18 And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat.

Exo 25:19 Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it *of one piece* with the mercy seat.

Exo 25:20 And the cherubim shall stretch out *their* wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim *shall be* toward the mercy seat.

Facing each other at opposite ends of the atonement cover were two cherubim made out of hammered gold. Cherubim are winged creatures in God’s service. We assume they are an order of angels, but we’re never told for sure.

The Bible, in other passages, gives various descriptions of cherubim; but we can’t say for sure what the cherubim on the Ark looked like.

The Ark was the primary article of furniture in the Tabernacle. It was the only thing in the Holy of Holies.

We've seen that it was a place where atonement was made. It was also the spot from where God communicated with His people:

Exo 25:21 You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you.

Exo 25:22 And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which *are* on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel.

God spoke with Moses from His glory between the two cherubim. Most likely Moses stayed in the Holy Place behind the veil that separated it from the Holy of Holies and the Ark.

It might be best to think of the Ark as God's throne on the earth.

I'll tell you what the Ark was not: It wasn't a magic box that contained God. No Israelite believed God was inside the box. When the Ark was placed in Solomon's Temple, Solomon's prayer showed that the people did not believe God was limited to one particular area. He said, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (First Kings 8:27).

There *were* times the Ark preceded Israel in battles they won, but it wasn't a source of power that guaranteed victory. In First Samuel chapter four, the Ark was with Israel, but they were defeated, and the Ark taken from them by the Philistines.

It wasn't intended to be a weapon. The Bible gives no report of lightning, electricity, or any other force emanating from the Ark as it was taken to battle. God was the One fighting for Israel, *not* the Ark.

The Ark was God's throne. It was **His** seat, in a manner of speaking. In Isaiah 64:16 we're told God was, "*the One* who dwells *between* the cherubim."

God provided a way for the Israelites to approach Him by the sacrifice of a substitute. There was a national day of sacrifice that took place once a year, the "Day of Atonement." On that day, the high priest sacrificed a bull and a goat for his own sin and for the sins of the people, and then he sprinkled the blood on the "atonement cover" of the Ark (Leviticus 16:11-17; 17:11).

In Romans 3:25 we are told of Jesus that "God set [Him] forth *as* a **propitiation** by His blood." **That word "propitiation" is the Greek equivalent of the word translated "atonement cover" or "mercy seat."**

The mercy seat of the Old Testament, and the blood sprinkled upon it by the High Priest, prefigured Jesus Christ. With the coming of Jesus Christ, God provided a new and better way - the offering up of His own Son for us as a Substitute and Sacrifice of *permanent* atonement. His death on the Cross was the once-for-all sacrifice for sin.

We therefore have no need of the Ark. But that doesn't mean it won't play some part in the Last Days.

#2 You Go Looking For The Lost Ark of the Covenant

When Jesus was on the earth, **there was no Ark in the Temple.**
The Holy of Holies was an empty room.

The last time we see the Ark is in the Old Testament, just prior to the destruction of the Temple by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. From that point in the sixth century forward, no one knows what happened to the Ark; not really.

The Jews were held captive in Babylon for 70 years until Persia defeated the Babylonians to become the world ruling empire. King Cyrus of Persia decreed that the Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple. In Ezra 1:7-11 we are given a detailed list of things that Cyrus returned to the Jews for their Temple:

Ezr 1:7 King Cyrus also brought out the articles of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Jerusalem and put in the temple of his gods;

Ezr 1:8 and Cyrus king of Persia brought them out by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and counted them out to Sheshbazzar [Zerubbabel] the prince of Judah.

Ezr 1:9 This *is* the number of them: thirty gold platters, one thousand silver platters, twenty-nine knives,

Ezr 1:10 thirty gold basins, four hundred and ten silver basins of a similar *kind*, and one thousand other articles.

Ezr 1:11 All the articles of gold and silver *were* five thousand four hundred. All *these* Sheshbazzar took with the captives who were brought from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Conspicuous by their absence are the sacred vessels of the Temple: The Golden Lampstand, the Table of Showbread, the Altar of Incense, and most notably, the Ark of the Covenant. All of them were unaccounted for.

The Jews rebuilt their Temple. It is sometimes called Zerubbabel's Temple, after the governor of Judah at the time. It's most often called the Second Temple.

That can be a little confusing, because the Temple that stood in Jesus' day was known as Herod's Temple after King Herod who oversaw the rebuilding. But since it was more a remodel, it is still considered the Second Temple.

Solomon's grand Temple was the First; Zerubbabel's and Herod's were the Second. As we will see in a minute, there will be a Third Temple.

There was no Ark in the Holy of Holies in the Second Temple. Many historical references attest to that fact. For example, in 167BC the Antiochus Epiphanes entered Jerusalem and desecrated the Temple. According to literature of that time, when he entered the Holy of Holies he found it empty.

You might be wondering how the High Priest was able to sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement since there was no Ark with its atonement cover. The Mishnah is a written compilation of Jewish oral tradition. In the Mishnah we read, "After the Ark was taken away, a stone remained there from the time of the Early Prophets, and it was called 'Shetiyah.' It was higher than the ground by three fingerbreadths (Yoma 5: 2)."

It was on this stone that the blood was sprinkled. Keep in mind, without God's presence between the cherubim on the Ark's cover, *there was no light in the Holy of Holies*. It was pitch dark.

There are a few credible theories on what might have happened to the Ark, and where it might be.

The first is that it was destroyed. Just because we're not told in the Bible, and there is no record in history, of its being melted-down for its gold, that doesn't mean it wasn't. There is nothing in the rest of the Bible that demands that the Ark be found.

The second theory is that the Ark has been, and remains, in Ethiopia. Through the centuries, Ethiopian Christians have claimed that the Ark rests in a chapel in the small town of Aksum, in their country's northern highlands. It arrived nearly 3000 years ago, they say, and has been guarded by a succession of monks who, once anointed, are forbidden to set foot outside the chapel grounds until they die.

There are at least two reasonable accounts regarding how the Ark came to be in Ethiopia. I will say this: The Ethiopian people are certain it's there. There is a long held Ethiopian belief that they can trace the ancestry of their kings back to Solomon. The twentieth century Ethiopian leader, Haile Selassie, was given titles belonging to the Davidic kings such as the "The Lion of the Tribe of Judah." He even had written into their Constitution some of the traditions linking him to Solomon.

Scholars like to poke holes in the timeline that the Ethiopian stories propose. The stories might have been revised, and be inaccurate. But that doesn't mean the Ark isn't in Ethiopia. It very well might be.

The third theory on the whereabouts is that it was hidden before the arrival of the Babylonians, and remains hidden today.

An important component of the hidden Ark theory is believing that there was a secret vault under Solomon's Temple. It makes sense you'd want to be able to rather quickly hide the Ark somewhere beneath the Temple.

Who hid it? Some say it was King Josiah. King Josiah had been told by Huldah the prophetess that the Temple would be destroyed soon after his death. Knowing this, he is said to have ordered the Ark to be put in the underground vault. Those who hold this theory say the Ark remains there, safely hidden.

Jeremiah may have hidden the Ark. He was prophesying the coming destruction of the Temple, and Jerusalem, so he had motive to hide the Ark.

The Temple Institute in Jerusalem is a group that is preparing for the building of the Third Temple in Jerusalem. To that end, they have reproduced all the articles necessary to reinstitute worship.

They've reproduced everything except the Ark. That's because they believe they know exactly where it is. This is quoted from their website:

Tradition records that even as King Solomon built the First Temple, he already knew, through Divine inspiration, that eventually it would be destroyed. Thus Solomon, the wisest of all men, oversaw the construction of a vast system of labyrinths, mazes, chambers and corridors underneath the Temple Mount complex.

He commanded that a special place be built in the bowels of the earth, where the sacred vessels of the Temple could be hidden in case of approaching danger. Midrashic tradition teaches that King Josiah of Israel, who lived about forty years before the destruction of the First Temple, commanded the Levites to hide the Ark, together with the original menorah and several other items, in this secret hiding place which Solomon had prepared.

This location is recorded in our sources, and today, there are those who know exactly where this chamber is. And we know that the ark is still there, undisturbed, and waiting for the day when it will be revealed.

That's a bold statement. And it may be true.

We know that a Third Temple will exist during the seven-year Great Tribulation. Daniel spoke of it prominently, and Jesus verified his prophecy. Imagine what would happen if the Lost Ark was to be found or brought out of hiding. It would most certainly encourage, if not demand, the building of the Third Temple to house it.

As exciting as that would be, we look beyond that, to a great truth in the Revelation. In 11:19 we read,

Rev 11:19 Then the temple of God was opened in heaven, and the ark of His covenant was seen in His temple. And there were lightnings, noises, thunderings, an earthquake, and great hail.

The Tabernacle on earth, and later Temples one, two and three, are copies of what exists in Heaven. The "Ark" in Heaven isn't the lost Ark of the Covenant. It's the original; the Ark we're talking about was a copy.

In the Tribulation, with the Third Temple on earth, God will show mankind that they have no need of the lost Ark. Believers have immediate access to God thanks to the propitiation of Jesus.

What about after the Great Tribulation? In the one-thousand year Kingdom of Heaven that follows the Tribulation, called the Millennium, there will be another Temple in Jerusalem. Let's call it the Millennial Temple. According to Jeremiah, **that Temple will not have the lost Ark, either:**

Jer 3:16 "Then it shall come to pass, when you are multiplied and increased in the land in those days," says the LORD, "that they will say no more, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It shall not come to mind, nor shall they remember it, nor shall they visit *it*, nor shall it be made anymore.

Jer 3:17 "At that time Jerusalem shall be called The Throne of the LORD, and all the nations shall be gathered to it, to the name of the LORD, to Jerusalem. No more shall they follow the dictates of their evil hearts.

Ezekiel describes the Millennial Temple in great detail (chapters 40-42), and he *never* mentions the Ark. There is a Holy of Holies (41:4), but it is empty, and it is not separated from the Holy Place by a veil.

The lost Ark represents what God has gone to great lengths to secure: a face-to-face, intimate relationship with you. The sin that came between God and mankind will finally be eradicated from the universe.

The last thing we read regarding a Temple is in the Revelation. In eternity, after the creation of new heavens and a new earth, and after all the believers from all time are in their forever glorified bodies, the apostle John exclaims,

Rev 21:22 But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

The fellowship lost in Eden will be restored, and then some.

The greatest action sequence of all times is imminent - the return of Jesus to resurrect the dead in Christ, and to rapture living believers.

Be ready.