

WHAT WAS THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

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It appears first in the Royal Masters Degree and each succeeding degree of Royal Arch Masonry. A re-creation of the holiest symbol of the religion of Moses, it displays on its top, first cherubims, next the keystone used to complete the building of the Temple, and finally the geometric representations of the long-lost Ancient Master's word. Carried by poles stuck through rings, the gilt painted box is called the Ark of the Covenant. Its use in the Royal Arch Ritual is well known, but its origin, purpose, history and disappearance are not. Legend and fact blend in a manner that camouflage each other in the records which remain of this chest having as much significance to Judaism as the Cross to Christianity.

The description of it in EXODUS 25 is that of a rectangular box. There appears to be no connection between it and Noah's Ark, either in shape or in purpose. It was the brainchild of Moses, who decided that the children of Israel, then wandering in the wilderness of Sinai after their liberation from Egypt, needed a place of worship. He may also have had a spacious purpose - that of controlling the wandering band now that Egyptian troops no longer restrained them. The idea of an Ark came to him even before he went up on Mount Sinai to receive the ten commandments. During the 40 days and 40 nights that he was on the mountain, God is said to have given him instructions for a portable tabernacle, the only house of worship practical for Nomadic people, and all that was to cover the Ark of the Covenant.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai bearing the tablets engraved with the ten commandments, he found the children of Israel worshipping a golden statue of a calf, after a practice that they had seen in Egypt. The story about Moses' breaking of the tablets didn't happen until after he had consulted God. At the same time he broke the tablets, he ordered the golden calf destroyed. He also ordered a purge of the tribes, killing all those who had participated in the heathen worship service. He then returned to Mount Sinai to receive duplicates of the commandments.

On his return from Mount Sinai he gave orders for making a tent out of goat's hair. He then called on the people to contribute their jewelry as a free will offering for the portable sanctuary to be constructed out of the tent. Next he selected two skilled workmen, Bezalel of the Tribe of Judah, and Oholiab, a weaver, of the Tribe of Dan, to design and

embroider draperies in blue, purple, and scarlet to hang on the upright frames of Acacia wood inside the tent.

Bezalel made the Ark of Acacia wood two and one half cubits, or five feet, in length and one and one half cubits wide and deep. He overlaid it with pure gold inside and outside and made a moulding of gold around it. At each corner he installed a gold ring through which poles could be thrust for carrying the Ark, for no one was allowed to touch it. A top called the Mercy Seat was of the same dimensions as the three long sides of the Ark and was also overlaid with gold. At each end of the Mercy Seat he placed a gold Cherubum with outspread wings which touched each other when the figures were in place. Bezalel also made Cherubums, hammering the gold donated by the Hebrews into the desired shape. Inside the Ark Moses placed the tablets engraved with the ten commandments. This was to be their resting place for all time; wherever the Tribes of Israel went, it was to go.

As a resting place for the Ark when the Tribes were not on the move, Bezalel made a table of Acacia wood. Other furnishings for the Holy of Holies included a lampstand with six branches, four cups, an Altar for burnt offerings, and pots, shovels, basins, and forks to be used when fires burned on the Altar.

On the appointed day the Ark was placed inside the veils inside the tent. None but Priests of the Tribe of Levi were allowed inside the the Holy of Holies, where the Ark rested. The Israelites were told that here God communicated his wishes for his chosen people. Whenever he wanted to speak to the High Priests, a cloud would appear above the tent or +abernacle. Until the cloud disappeared, the Israelites were not allowed to leave their campsite. When they did leave, the tent, the Holy of Holies, and the Ark moved with them.

Their wanderings in the desert of Sinai lasted 40 years because they feared to enter the Promised Land. But at the end of that time a new spirit had come into them and also into their military leader, Joshua. They no longer feared the heathen peoples in the land of Canaan. They were ready to possess the land when Joshua was ready to lead them. Most of the Hebrews who had been people of the Exodus had died. Their children and their grand children had replaced them and were a fierce and independant breed trusting Jehovah and fearing no one but Jehovah. They camped east of the Jordan for three days preparing an invasion. There were no trumpets or banners to lead the way; There was the Ark of the Covenant, which the Priests carried on poles into the middle of the Jordan river to mark the place of entry into the promised land. Legend states that the Jordan stopped flowing so that the

Israelites could cross, so great was the power of the Ark.

Before the walls of Jericho the Hebrew Army paused. Joshua commanded the Priests to carry the Ark around the city while blowing their rams' horns. This went on for 6 days, and on the 7th the army marched seven times around the city as the Priests carried the Ark. The wall around Jericho collapsed; the Hebrew army entered and sacked the city.

The Bible makes no further mention of the Ark in the books of JOSHUA OR JUDGES. For a span of 250 years it remained in the tent-tabernacle. The Hebrews completed their conquest of Canaan, then turned to evil ways, worshipping foreign Gods and fighting among themselves. They also fought invaders but successfully repelled them until a powerful nation, the Philistines, began to dominate an area between Canaan and Egypt, today known as the Gaza strip. One of the greatest of High Priests, Samuel, was then the judge over Israel. He called for a Holy war against the Philistines. Some of the elders of the Tribes assembled for the campaign remembered that in Joshua's time the Ark of the Covenant had been carried into battle and had aided, or so they believed, the collapse of the walls of Jericho. They sent to Shiloh, the resting place of the Ark, to have it brought to the battlefield, two sons of Eli, the old High Priest, Hophni and Phineas by name, fetched the Ark and brought it to the Hebrew camp amidst shouts of joy.

The Philistines had heard of the Ark and its importance to Hebrews. Some were fearful, having heard of many victories the Hebrews had won while carrying it, but their leaders urged them to fight, lest they become slaves to the Hebrews. The battle was fierce and a complete victory for the Philistines. 30,000 thousand Israelites, if the figure can be believed, fell on that day, and the Ark of the Covenant was captured. Hophni and Phineas were among the dead. When Eli heard the news, he fell over backwards and broke his neck.

A Sardonically humorous event then occurred. The wife of Phineas gave birth to a son and named him Ichabod, which means "The glory has departed".

The Philistines carried the Ark of the Covenant to the Temple of their God, Dagon, at Ashdod.

Their military triumph turned into a medical nightmare. People began developing tumors, and they blamed it on the presence of the Ark in the Temple Dagon. A public outcry caused the Philistines to remove the Ark and send it to Gath, a Philistine city. There another plague of tumors broke out, and the people of Gath demanded that it be sent to Ekron.

Word of the epidemic reached Ekron before the Ark did. When it arrived, the people of Ekron refused to receive it and insisted on sending it back to the Hebrews.

The Philistine Priests held a council to decide what to do with the battle trophy that was causing them so much anguish. Out of their discussion came a solution: Send it back but send along with it a peace offering of 5 golden tumors and 5 golden mice. Place the Ark on a cart to be pulled by two cows giving milk and let the cows take it where their instinct led them. This was done; The cows walked out of Philistine territory to the Hebrew community of Beth Shemesh. The cows stopped at the field of Joshua near Beth Shemesh. The Hebrews received the Ark with rejoicing. Some Levites removed the Ark from the cart, broke up the cart and used it to start a fire, then sacrificed the cows as a thanksgiving offering to Jehovah for the return of their most sacred treasure.

There were some men of Beth Shemesh who were overly curious. They had the temerity to look into the Ark and were immediately struck dead. Now the people of Beth Shemesh were afraid to keep the Ark. They summoned men from the nearby community of Kiriath-Jearim to come and move it. The men of Kiriath-Jearim came for the Ark and carried it to the house of Abinadab, whose son, Eleazar, was consecrated a Priest to have charge of the Ark, here it remained for perhaps seventy years.

Samuel, High Priest and Prophet of Israel, urged his nation to turn from their evil ways and once more serve the God of Moses, who had shown his forgiveness by returning the Ark. It was a new Israel which resumed the war with the Philistines. At a place called Mizpah they completely routed an invading army of Philistines and sent them flying back to their own territory. The Hebrews also recaptured the cities of Ekron and Gath.

During the remainder of Samuel's life during the reign of Israel's first king, Saul, there was nothing but silence from, or about the Ark. It remained in Abinadab's house at Kiriath-Jearim until the reign of David, Israel's most famous king and military leader.

In the 7th year of David's reign he led an expedition against the Jebusite city of Jerusalem. Sneaking his forces into the city through a well shaft, he overpowered its defenders and captured Jerusalem, which became the capital of his increasingly powerful nation.

His successes as a king and a military leader brought him

to the attention of Hiram, king of Phoenicia, who sent him wood from the Lebanon mountains to build a palace at Jerusalem.

Before David could do more, he had to fight one more war with the Philistines, and this time he effectively finished them as a threat to the Hebrews.

After his victory he led his 30,000 thousand man army to a place called Baale Judah. From here he sent word to the house of Abinadab to bring forth the Ark of the Covenant, which had rested there since the days of Samuel. On a new cart driven by Uzzah and Aho the Ark made its way to David's camp, where it was received with a musical salute. But it also brought tragedy: Uzzah touched the Ark when one of the oxen drawing it stumbled. He collapsed and died on the spot. David then feared to take the Ark to Jerusalem, so it remained for three months at the house of Obedom. Nothing happened to Obedom or anyone in his household, so David decided it was safe to haul the Ark to Jerusalem, where it reposed once more in a tent, as it had in the time of Moses.

Then came to David the idea for building a Temple. He thought it unfitting for God to live in a tent while his servant, David, lived in a palace of cedar. He communicated this thought to Nathan, the chief prophet of Israel, who reminded David that God had not commanded any of his predecessors to build a house, so he had no cause to believe that it was God's wish that David do so.

Nathan then prophesied that a son of David, who was yet unborn, would erect a Temple. The lineage of David would be forever, even though God would find it necessary to chasten his people when they fell into error.

There was no more mention of the Ark of the Covenant during the turbulent life of David. So dissolute was his private life and so wracked with warfare his career as a king that he wouldn't have been able to erect a permanent home for the Ark.

David was 70 years old when he died. Solomon succeeded him after a quarrel with Adonijah, an older son of David.

The building of the Temple at Jerusalem was the result of a dream the new king had. In the dream he talked about God. On awakening he went to the Ark of the covenant and made a burnt offering to it.

Next Solomon approached Hiram, the Phoenician King, and announced his plan to build a Temple at Jerusalem. Hiram, who

had always admired David, rejoiced that such a wise son had succeeded him on the throne and promised to supply both timber and laborers to aid the King of Israel in erecting what had been David's dream.

The story of the building of the Temple is well known to Masons, so it is not necessary to repeat it here. When it was complete, Solomon assembled all the elders of Israel as well as the heads of the Tribes and brought them to Jerusalem for the solemn ceremony of bringing the Ark from the house of David to the Temple and placing it in the Holy of Holies. Those who carried it had to walk in total darkness, for they were not allowed to look on the Ark. At the dedication service Solomon made an eloquent address presented as a prayer to God. He confessed the wickedness of the people and praised God for having led the children of Israel through so many vicissitudes and forgiving their iniquity. Then he sacrificed hundreds of sheep and oxen during the week long ceremony.

The history of the Ark is as dark as the chamber which housed it during the balance of Solomon's reign. Even after his son Rehoboam succeeded him, even after the division of the kingdom, even after a rival kingdom called Israel, with its capital at Samaria, came into being, there was no mention of the Ark, which remained in the Holy of Holies inside Solomon's Temple.

Solomon's son Rehoboam continued to reign at Jerusalem, but only over the Tribes of Judah and Benjamin. As most Hebrew rulers, including David and Solomon, had done, he broke the laws of Moses and suffered the penalty. Shishak, king of Egypt, invaded Jerusalem. He sacked the city and the Temple and carried off all the gold objects found therein.

While the book of CHRONICLES does not specifically mention the Ark as one of the sacred objects, it is probable that it was, since it was covered with gold and would therefore have been a temptation to the Egyptians. There is no further mention of the Ark in the Bible. When Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and took away all the goodly vessels, he found no Ark of the Covenant among them. 250 years after the Ark's disappearance a good King, Josiah, reigned at Jerusalem. He tried to suppress the idolatry which was rampant in Judah at the time by ordering repairs to be made on the Temple. While the work was in progress, Hilkiah, High Priest of Judah and father of the great prophet, Jeremiah, reported finding a book of the law which bore the autograph of Moses. It had been buried next to the Ark of the Covenant and not discovered by the Egyptians when they raided Jerusalem. The Royal Arch Degree is founded

on this passage reported in both II KINGS and II CHRONICLES, on the rebuilding of the Temple a 100 years later.

The absurd movie, Raiders of the Lost Ark, attempts to portray the temporary recovery of the Ark for its special powers. Based on a fictitious event 50 years ago, it depicted the search by a German special forces team to find it so it could be used in Hitler's plan for world conquest, while an American, Indiana Jones, tried to reach it first. In the end it was again lost because no one could control its powers.

It is debatable whether there ever was an Ark of the Covenant. Its disappearance at a period when the history of the Jews changed from legend to documentation is very convenient for Biblical writers. Even if there was an Ark, it is not likely that it contained the stone tablets or had supernatural powers. The Hebrew Priesthood used the Ark, or the assertion that there was one, to control the people through superstition. The miracles attributed to it were coincidences that could have happened had there been no Ark. If it afflicted the heathen, why did it not lead to the repulse of Shishak's army rather than its victory, when the Ark itself disappeared?

Much of what is considered the history of the Ark was written long after the actual events occurred. It was common practice among ancient writers to exaggerate, distort, and interpolate events from other eras when writing historical narrative. Most events attributed to the Ark never happened but were written to show the influence of God in the lives of his chosen people so that they would not forget that they were the chosen. So many of the events connected with the Ark followed periods of sin and violating the Covenant between Jehovah and his people that the narrative is obviously meant to show that punishment follows sin.

To Masons the Ark is a symbol of the presence of God everywhere, but most particularly in a shrine dedicated to his worship. Its presence at the dedication of the Temple symbolizes the power of God, and recovery of a facsimile from the Ninth Arch symbolizes the eternal existence of a Supreme being. Thus had the light of morality ever burned, even when buried in total darkness.

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References: Exodus 25 and 37
Joshua 4
I Samuel 4 and 5
I Kings 7
I Chronicles 15 and 16
II Chronicles 13