

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE ARK OF THE COVENANT?

(Danny Hays in *The Baker Illustrated Bible Handbook*)

The ark of the covenant was a wooden box, approximately 4 x 2½ x 2½ feet, covered inside and out with gold, capped with a golden mercy seat that was flanked by two golden cherubim. When God brought Israel up out of Egypt during the exodus, he gave Moses specific instructions on how to construct this ark (Exodus 25). Throughout the early history of Israel, the ark of the covenant played a critical role, for it represented the focal point of God's Presence among Israel, combining his holiness and his power with his desire to dwell among his people and relate to them.



In 3:16 Jeremiah makes a very radical prediction: in the future restoration the ark will be gone, and, more surprisingly, no one will even miss it. In accordance with Jeremiah's prophecy, the ark of the covenant disappears from biblical history after the Babylonians capture and destroy Jerusalem in 587/586 BC. What happened to it?

Numerous legends and theories that attempt to answer this question continue to circulate. One very questionable Jewish legend states that Jeremiah himself hid the ark beneath the Temple Mount just before the Babylonians captured the city. Some speculate that it is still there. A few people claim to have seen it. Most Old Testament scholars find this legend highly unlikely, without any verifiable evidence to support it.

Another legend about the ark comes from Ethiopia. The Ethiopian national "folk legend" states that the queen of Sheba was an Ethiopian queen. After she visited King Solomon in Jerusalem, she returned to Ethiopia and gave birth to Solomon's son, a boy named Menilek. Later, Menilek returned to Jerusalem to visit his father, but then stole the ark of the covenant, taking it with him back to Ethiopia, where it remains to this day. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church claims to have the original ark of the covenant in a church in the ancient city of Axum. Unfortunately, they will not let any scholars examine it.

The problem with this legend is that it doesn't square with history. King Solomon predates the Axumite kingdom of Menilek by nearly one thousand years. Thus it is highly unlikely that Solomon was Menilek's father. However, the Ethiopians have something very old and significant in that church that has produced this ancient legend, along with several church rituals relating to the ark. What do they actually have in that church?

One possibility relates to a Jewish colony that was built in ancient southern Egypt on the Isle of Elephantine on the Nile River. In the sixth century BC the Egyptians hired Jewish mercenaries to defend a fortress on this island. Archaeological excavations on this site indicate that these Jews apparently constructed a model of the temple in Jerusalem on their island, ostensibly to worship God. Did they also construct a model of the ark of the covenant to place in that temple? Perhaps. No one knows for certain what happened to these Jewish mercenaries who had settled in southern Egypt. Some suggest they migrated east into Ethiopia, taking their replica of the ark with them. If this scenario is true, then the Ethiopians might have this ark, a very old (and highly significant) replica of the ark of the covenant, but not the original.

Most scholars maintain that the most likely fate of the ark of the covenant is that the Babylonian army melted it down and carried the gold back to Babylonia. At any rate, Jeremiah was correct. The ark disappeared. God's people today experience God's Presence through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; thus they do not miss the ark of the covenant.

