

# The mysteries of the Ark of the Covenant

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The Ark of the Covenant, or Ark of Yhwh, has stimulated the imagination of many people from biblical times up to today: it has served as the inspiration for many stories, as the subject of paintings, and even the fodder for Hollywood directors, who still today show an interest in producing movies about the Lost Ark. There are probably many reasons for this fascination. For starters, the Hebrew Bible itself leaves many questions about the Ark open: What happened to the Ark after King Solomon brought it into the Temple? Was the Ark deported or destroyed when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem? And what did the Ark originally contain?

In English, as in other languages, there can be some confusion about the Ark, because the reader of the Bible finds two arks in the Bible: the Ark of Noah and the Ark of the Covenant. This is due to the Latin translation, probably inspired by the Greek translation,<sup>1</sup> which uses the term *arca*, meaning chest, box, coffer or coffin, for two different Hebrew lexemes.

The term *tebah* (תִּבָּה) is used to designate the ship that Noah built in order to survive the Flood, as well as the box in Exodus 2, in which Moses' mother places her baby to hide him from Pharaoh. This word is probably an Egyptian loanword, either from *db't* (sanctuary, sarcophagus), or from *tbt* (coffer, box).

The West Semitic term *'arôn* (אָרוֹן) designates also a box or a coffer and is used more than 200 times, almost exclusively<sup>2</sup> for the Ark of Yhwh or the Ark of the Covenant, which is also called the Ark of God, the Ark of the God of Israel, the Ark of the Testimony (*'arôn ha'edût*), the Ark of Yhwh of Hosts Sitting on the Cherubim, the Holy Ark, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Within the structure of the Hebrew Bible, the Ark appears for the first time in the book of Exodus in the context of the construction of the mobile sanctuary in the wilderness (Exod 25–31 and 35–40), which gives a detailed description of its appearance that has influenced most reconstructions and paintings of the Ark (Exod 25:10–22): The Ark shall be made out of acacia wood, overlaid with pure gold and covered with a “mercy seat,” with two cherubim with outstretched

wings. This is, as we will see later, probably one of the latest texts about the Ark.

The final mention of the Ark, according to most manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, is at the end of the canon, in the book of Chronicles (2 Chr 35:11). Here, King Josiah orders the Levites to place the Holy Ark into the Jerusalemite temple. This is quite an astonishing command, as the Ark had already been placed into the temple by Solomon.

We will also return to this text in a while.

### *Sigmund Mowinckel's view on the Ark*

Sigmund Mowinckel, whose scholarship we are honouring with this lecture,<sup>4</sup> took much interest in the question of the Ark in the Hebrew Bible, especially in an article that was published in 1929 in the French journal *La Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*. The title of the article (translated into English) was: "When Did the Cult of Yhwh in Jerusalem Become Officially a Cult without Images?"<sup>5</sup> He opposed the traditional view that the worship of Yhwh was aniconic from the beginning, quoting among others 1 Kings 12. According to this story, after the separation between the South and the North, Jeroboam established sanctuaries in Dan and Bethel, where Yhwh was worshipped as a young bull.

He also focused on the Ark of Yhwh, which he saw as another indication of the existence of representations of Yhwh.

The strange verse of 1 Kings 8:9, which concludes the installation of the Ark into the Jerusalem temple's Holy of Holies, indicates that the Ark did not originally contain the two tablets of the law.

According to 1 Kings 8:9, "There was nothing in the Ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses had placed there at Horeb, where Yhwh made a covenant with the Israelites, when they came out of the land of Egypt." This emphasis on the "nothing else" (אין בארון רק) makes it very likely that this statement about the Ark's contents has resulted from a *relecture* of its original function.

What, then, were the original contents of the Ark? According to Mowinckel, the Ark originally contained a statue of a bull representing Yhwh. In Psalm 132, which alludes to a procession of the Ark, Yhwh is called twice *'abbîr ya'aqôb* (v. 2 and 5) – an expression that Mowinckel translated as "bull of Jacob/Israel."<sup>6</sup>

Mowinckel originally thought that this bull statue remained in the Ark of Jerusalem until it was captured or destroyed by the Babylonians, who invaded Jerusalem and burned the temple in 587 BCE. He

ultimately envisaged the original Ark as containing a zoomorphic representation of Yhwh and having been taken as part of Pharaoh Sheshonq's spoils during his Palestinian campaign around 926 BCE. The Jerusalemite priests then made a new Ark and placed within it two stones, as a more abstract representation of Yhwh (and maybe his spouse Asherah?<sup>7</sup>) akin to the *maššebot*.<sup>8</sup> These stones were later identified by Deuteronomistic redactors with the tablets of the law, as in Deuteronomy 10 or 1 Kings 8.

Mowinckel assumed that there were several arks, with each important sanctuary hosting its own.<sup>9</sup> The ark of the sanctuary of Shiloh, mentioned in the opening chapters of the book of Samuel, was probably the oldest, but it is not very plausible that this ark was transferred to Jerusalem as the Bible would have us believe.<sup>10</sup>

### *The function and the content of the Ark*

How shall we evaluate Mowinckel's view on the Ark today? He is certainly right that an ark is a transportable sanctuary. Such an ark or arks certainly existed in ancient Israel and are therefore not a literary invention of the biblical writers.

According to chapter 6 of the First Book of Samuel, the Ark was placed on a chariot drawn by cows, a sign that it must have been an object of some importance and size. One can compare the ark to sacred chests attested in Egyptian iconography and used during processions.

A chest mounted upon a chariot seems also to be attested among the Phoenicians. According to Philo of Byblos (c. 65–140) in his *Phoenician History*, two gods named "Fields" (*agrós*, perhaps corresponding to *šaddāy*) and "Rustic" (*agrótēs*) were associated with a chest (*naós*) pulled by two beasts.<sup>11</sup>

A relief from the Temple of Bel in Palmyra depicts a procession with a camel carrying a portable sanctuary, which is worshipped by four veiled women. The canopy may have hosted a sacred stone, which may have represented the deity Arsû.<sup>12</sup>

We may also have representations of "arks" in a relief from the palace of Tiglat-Pileser depicting the deportations of the gods of Gaza. Among these statues is a sort of a box with a divine statue smaller than the others, which may be an ark, a mobile sanctuary.<sup>13</sup> A similar object may also appear in a deportation scene from a relief of Sargon II.<sup>14</sup>

We can therefore be quite sure that the Ark of Yhwh originally contained a representation of the god of Israel. This is also suggested by an episode in the Ark Narrative (see below).

After the Philistines send the Ark back to the Israelites, the cows carrying the Ark stop at Beth-Shemesh. But Yhwh kills some of the population there, because they have, according to the MT, looked at – or better, in – the Ark of Yhwh:

He (Yhwh) struck at the men of Beth-Shemesh because they had looked into the Ark of Yhwh. And he struck down among them seventy men.<sup>15</sup> (1 Sam 6:19)

Therefore, this episode suggests that the Ark contained a representation of Yhwh that non-priests were forbidden to see. For this reason, Yhwh punished those who did not respect this taboo.

In summary, we can confirm Mowinckel's idea that the original Ark contained a statue of Yhwh. Whether there were several arks in ancient Israel and Judah or just one is difficult to decide. According to the Bible, there was only one Ark of Yhwh, which was kept at Shiloh after the conquest, before it was brought to Jerusalem.

Let us now turn to the so-called "Ark Narrative", which recounts the loss of the Ark and its return to Israel.

### *The so-called Ark Narrative and its original meaning*

1 Samuel 4:1–7:1 and 2 Samuel 6 narrate the following story: The Ark, which was kept in the sanctuary of Shiloh, is taken to the battlefield in a war between the Philistines and the Israelites in order to secure victory for the Israelites. However, it is captured by the Philistines and brought as loot into the temple of the Philistine god Dagan in Ashdod. In the temple, the Ark's power destroys the statue of Dagan, and so the Philistines send it to another city, Gath. Here, it strikes the population with plagues, so they transfer it to Ekron. The plagues continue, so the Philistines relent and return the Ark to the Israelites. They place it on a cart carried by two milch cows, separated from their calves. The fact that the cows bring the Ark back to Israel rather than returning to their calves is understood as the result of divine intervention. Strangely enough, the Ark does not return to its original sanctuary, but instead arrives first at Beth-Shemesh.

As we have seen, it does not remain here due to the inhabitants' behaviour. Thereafter, the people of Kiriath Jearim come and take the Ark for themselves. They consecrate a priest to take care of it (1 Sam 7:1), and there it remains until David transfers it, not without difficulty, to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6).

The idea that 1 Sam 4,1–7,1\* and 2 Sam 6\* constitute an independent Ark Narrative comes from Leonhard Rost.<sup>16</sup> Rost postulated that this narrative had been written by an “eyewitness” – a priest of the Ark during the reign of David or Solomon. According to Rost, the narrative is characterized by specific vocabulary, style (many speeches and questions), and a theological stance. Yhwh is presented as a god who strikes his enemies and brings salvation to his people. Rost’s hypothesis was accepted by many scholars,<sup>17</sup> who assumed that a Deuteronomist redactor integrated this old tradition into his account about Samuel and the origins of the monarchy.

There is no doubt that 1 Samuel 4:1–7:1 constitutes an independent narrative. The prophet Samuel, whose birth and actions are recounted in 1 Sam 1–3 and 7:2, does not appear in the Ark Narrative. The Greek text of 1 Sam 4:1 offers a fitting opening to an independent narrative:

In those days, the Philistines mustered for war against Israel, and Israel went out to battle against them.<sup>18</sup>

The Greek introduction “in those days” is the equivalent of the Hebrew expression, *וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם*, which introduces new narratives in Exodus 2:11, Judges 19:1 and 1 Samuel 28:1, and is therefore an appropriate beginning of an independent narrative.

However, the question is where this independent narrative originally ended. Several scholars have indeed pointed out that 2 Samuel 6 (the transfer of the Ark to Jerusalem) is not a fitting end to the narrative.<sup>19</sup> The first problem is that the part about David’s transfer of the Ark to Jerusalem, ostensibly the heart of the story, is separated from the main block of the narrative. Moreover, the story in 2 Samuel 6 is quite different from the story in 1 Sam 4:1–7:1 and does not fit as a direct continuation of 1 Samuel 7:1:

- David appears in 2 Samuel 6 without any introduction.
- The style and vocabulary of 1 Samuel 4:1b – 7:1 on the one hand and 2 Samuel 6 on the other are quite different. The two units share only four of the fifty-four words and expressions that Rost considered to be typical of the so-called Ark Narrative.<sup>20</sup>
- 1 Sam 4:1b – 7:1 does not hint at Jerusalem being the Ark’s final destination, which would be logical had the narrative been the *hieros logos* of an Ark shrine in the Jerusalem temple.

This means that the original story ended with the arrival of the ark at Kiriath Jearim in 1 Samuel 7:1: “And the people of Kiriath Jearim came and took up the ark of Yhwh and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. They consecrated his son, Eleazar, to have charge of the Ark of Yhwh.”

In 1 Samuel 7:1, Eleazar, son of Abinadab, is consecrated (אִשָּׁרֵף) to be in charge of the Ark. The root *q-d-š* is used for the consecration of priests, such as in Leviticus 8:10. Thus, the consecration of Eleazar is placed in contrast to the end of the Elide priesthood of Shiloh.

The beginning of the narrative in 1 Samuel 4 indeed tells of two related catastrophes: the capture of the Ark by the Philistines and the death of the priest of Shiloh, Eli, preceded by the death of his two sons. The two passages are related because they show that the sanctuary of Shiloh is no longer considered legitimate; it no longer hosts the Ark, and its priestly dynasty has disappeared. By the end of the story, Shiloh has vanished from the scene, and there is no explanation for why the Ark was not brought back to its original place and has instead found a new home at Kiriath Jearim.

This means that we need to understand the original narrative (which was later revised several times<sup>21</sup>) as the *hieros logos*, the foundation legend, of the sanctuary of Kiriath Jearim.

If this is the case, who wrote this narrative and in what geopolitical context? With the exception of 1 Samuel 7:1, the Bible never explicitly mentions a sanctuary at Kiriath Jearim. Can archaeology help to check the existence of a sanctuary here that may have hosted the Ark?

### *Excavations at Kiriath Jearim*

Kiriath Jearim is securely identified with the mound of Deir el-‘Azar above the village of Abu Ghosh, 13 km west-northwest of the Old City of Jerusalem. The Arabic name probably still preserves the name “Eleazar”, who, according to 1 Samuel 7:1, was the priest of the Ark there. The site sits at a commanding location over one of the main routes to Jerusalem in antiquity.

Today, this site is dominated by a church dedicated to “Our Lady of the Ark of the Covenant” and a monastery (built in 1906) hosting a congregation of nuns belonging to the “Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Holy Apparition”. The church was built in 1924 on the remains of an older Byzantine church or monastery from the fifth or sixth century. This indicates an ongoing tradition that relates this place to the Ark tradition; one may even speculate about whether the Byzantine sanctuary had been

erected on an older non-Christian place, which was a quite common phenomenon for the construction of Christian sanctuaries in the first centuries C.E.

As arial pictures show, the top of the hill is broad and flat, a result of support terrace-walls that were erected around it. Had an elevated rectangular platform existed at the site in antiquity, it would be a monumental architectural feature, unique in the Southern Highlands.

After surveys and salvage excavations, a joint venture between Tel Aviv University and the Collège de France conducted the first excavations on this site during the summers of 2017 and 2019. Work could not be carried out on the summit of the hill due to the monastery building as well as church functions.

Instead, three areas on the slopes were chosen:

*Area A*, located on two flat terraces to the immediate north of the convent, with the aim of checking out the possibility of an east-west support wall on the northern side of the summit.

*Area B*, on the southeastern slope, aimed at checking out the southern end of the large eastern terrace.

*Area C*, on a flat, broad terrace on the lower eastern slope, aimed at investigating the nature of the site beyond the supposed summit platform and exploring the possibility of revealing a stratigraphic sequence, at least for the Iron Age.

The excavations in Areas A and B confirmed the existence of massive support walls that created the summit platform. However, dating these walls is not easy. The pottery finds are mixed, which indicates that these walls were renovated several times, especially in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Therefore, the layers on the inner side of the walls produced a mixed pottery assemblage.

Faced with the difficulty of dating the walls based on stratigraphic and ceramic criteria, and in the absence of samples available for radiocarbon dating, we opted for dating by Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL). This method measures the time elapsed from the moment when the quartz grains in the sediment were last exposed to sunlight. The results of these tests allow us to hypothesize that the construction of the retaining walls, and therefore the construction of the platform, seems to date to the beginning of the Iron IIB in the first half of the eighth century BCE. This date is also confirmed by the pottery, in that Iron IIB pottery is very much present in the parts of the wall close to the bedrock.

Regarding the identity of the builder, we can observe the following: No elevated platform of this type is known elsewhere in Judah, but there are examples in the Northern Kingdom (especially in Samaria) and in Neo-Assyrian constructions (for instance, in Buseirah in Edom). There are therefore two possibilities: Assyrian construction or Northern Israelite construction. Opting for the Assyrian hypothesis sets the earliest possible date at Sennacherib's campaign in 701 BCE. However, the dates of the OSL samples, as well as the pottery from Area A, are a little too old to support this hypothesis. We must therefore favour the hypothesis of a Northern Israelite construction of the elevated platform of Kiriath Jearim.

The best candidate for this construction is then King Jeroboam, also called Jeroboam II. This king, who is almost silenced in the HB, ruled however during some forty years (ca. 781–742). Under Jeroboam, Israel reached its maximal territorial expansion, so that he certainly controlled Benjamin and perhaps built Kiriath Jearim as a border sanctuary similar to the sanctuary of Dan in the North. In this scenario, he would have been able to form the hill of Kiriath Jearim on the border between Israel and Judah to allow the construction of a Northern administrative complex with the intention of controlling the Southern vassal kingdom and its capital, Jerusalem. This administrative centre was able to accommodate a temple – possibly the sanctuary that hosted the Ark.

It can therefore be hypothesized that the early history of the Ark was composed in the time of Jeroboam II to legitimize the site of Kiriath Jearim as the new location of the Ark after the destruction of Shiloh.

### *The story of the transfer of the Ark in the time of King Josiah*

In light of this, the question arises as to who authored the text telling of David's transfer of the Ark to Jerusalem? The answer to this question relates to the question of when the Ark actually arrived at the temple in Jerusalem. A fairly simple explanation could be the hypothesis that the Ark did not enter the Jerusalem temple until the time of King Josiah; this would mean that it was Josiah's scribes who composed the story of 2 Samuel 6 as well as that of the location of the Ark in the Temple in 1 Kings 6–8. If it was only Josiah who brought the Ark from Kiriath Jearim to Jerusalem as part of his centralization policy, that would also explain why the books of Kings are silent about the Ark, other than the claim that Solomon placed it in the Temple: Because it only arrived there 50 years before the destruction of the Temple, during the reign of Josiah. It seems that Josiah was able to annex



Benjamin (a territory that included Kiriath Jearim) and, therefore, as part of his policy of centralization, repatriate an important Yahwistic symbol to Jerusalem, although without destroying the site.

The excavations in Area C revealed a city district outside the walls that was undoubtedly still functioning in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. This is also confirmed by the mention in the book of Jeremiah of a prophet from Kiriath Jearim who came to Jerusalem, possibly in the context of Josiah's reform:

There was another man prophesying in the name of Yhwh, Uriah son of Shemaiah from Kiriath Jearim. He prophesied against this city and<sup>22</sup> against this land in words exactly like those of Jeremiah. (Jer 26:20)

The information of a prophet from Kiriath Jearim acting in Jerusalem makes sense if the city's sanctuary had been closed not so long before.

According to the book of Chronicles, King Josiah, when conducting his reform, gives a strange order:

He [Josiah] said to the Levites who taught all Israel and who were holy to Yhwh, 'Put the holy Ark in the house that Solomon son of David, king of Israel, built; do not carry it on your shoulders. Now serve Yhwh your God and his people Israel.' (2 Chr 35:3)

This strange remark in 2 Chronicles 35:3 has been explained by rabbis and church fathers in various ways: According to the Talmud, Josiah hid the Ark during his reform.<sup>23</sup> According to other Jewish (Kimhi, Pseudo-Rashi) and Christian (Theodoret of Cyrus) commentators, the Ark had been removed from the Temple by Manasseh or Amon in order to make room for the idol of Asherah<sup>24</sup> and was then returned under Josiah. However, the Bible does not contain any hint at such a removal.

The best explanation is that this verse preserves a memory of the Ark being brought into the Jerusalem temple under Josiah.

It is possible that Psalm 132, which alludes to the transport of the Ark and to which Mowinckel paid much attention, was written in the same context in order to legitimate its transfer from Kiriath Jearim to Jerusalem.

In this psalm, we read:

<sup>4</sup> I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids,  
<sup>5</sup> until I find a place for Yhwh, a dwelling place for the Bull of Jacob:  
<sup>6</sup> We heard of it in Ephrathah; we found it in the fields of Jaar.  
<sup>8</sup> Rise up, Yhwh, and go to your resting place, you and the Ark of  
your might.  
<sup>13</sup> For Yhwh has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation:  
<sup>14</sup> This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have  
desired it.

The phrase “fields of Jaar” certainly alludes to Kiriath Jearim, and Ephrata either to a region in Benjamin or to Bethlehem, David’s hometown. In any case, this psalm may have been composed at the same time as 2 Samuel 6 in order to accompany the transfer of the Ark from Kiriath Jearim to Jerusalem, which had become Yhwh’s exclusive “resting place”.

Therefore, our next question is: What happened to the Ark after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Babylonians in 587 BCE?

### *The disappearance of the Ark and the discussion about its reconstruction*

Neither 2 Kings nor 2 Chronicles provide any information about what happened to the Ark after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

According to 2 Kings 24:13, the king of Babylon:

carried off all the treasures of the house of Yhwh, and the treasures of the king’s house; he cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of Yhwh, which King Solomon of Israel had made, all this as the Yhwh had foretold.

2 Chronicles 36:18 states similarly that “All the vessels of the house of God, large and small, and the treasures of the house of Yhwh, and the treasures of the king and of his officials, all these he brought to Babylon.”

The Ark is not explicitly mentioned here, and some scholars have therefore argued that the Ark had been destroyed by previous kings, such as Manasseh<sup>25</sup> or others.<sup>26</sup> However, the most plausible hypothesis is that the Ark disappeared during the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians. Since it is not mentioned among the objects of the Temple that the Persians gave back to the Judeans (Ezra 1:7–11; 5:13–15), it does

not seem that the Ark was taken as spoil to Babylon,<sup>27</sup> but that it was destroyed during the burning of Temple.<sup>28</sup>

The book of Jeremiah contains a mention of the Ark that may well fit to the beginning of the Persian period, when the Persian king allowed and even encouraged the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple. It suggests that the Ark should not be remade (Jer 3:14–18):

14 Return, sons that turned away, oracle of Yhwh, for I am your baal; I will take you, one from a city and two from a clan, and I will bring you to Zion. 15 I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will shepherd you with knowledge and understanding. 16 And it will happen that you multiply and increase in the land, in those days, oracle of Yhwh, one will not say any more, “The Ark of the covenant of Yhwh.” It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed. It will not be made again.

17 At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of Yhwh, and all nations shall gather to it – to Yhwh’s name to Jerusalem<sup>29</sup> –, and they shall not follow the stubbornness of their evil mind. 18 In those days the house of Judah shall walk alongside the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers<sup>30</sup> for a heritage.

In its present form, this section probably reflects a discussion about possibly remaking the Ark for the Second Temple. Apparently, there was an important group in favour of rebuilding the lost Ark.<sup>31</sup>

This is especially the case of the “priestly school”, who in Exodus 25–31 and 35–40 describe the tabernacle in the wilderness as foreshadowing the (second) Jerusalem temple.<sup>32</sup> The Ark plays important roles in both the building instructions and the construction account. In Exodus 25, the Ark is covered by a *kapporet*,<sup>33</sup> which is protected by two cherubs. This may be understood as a priestly reinterpretation of the cherubs in the First Temple who protected the throne of Yhwh. In any case, the idea to have the (new) Ark associated with cherubs triggered opposition to remaking it,<sup>34</sup> as well as the idea that the first Ark contained a representation of Yhwh.<sup>35</sup> Such iconic concepts were no longer compatible with the rise of aniconism in the Persian period.

Mowinckel understood the depiction of the plundering of the Second Temple as shown on the Arch of Titus as an indication that there was an Ark in the Second Temple.<sup>36</sup> To the right of the Menorah, the candelabrum, there is indeed a box or a chest, but this is more likely to be the table

of showbread, which contained cakes or breads as offerings. Were there an Ark in the Second Temple, it would be difficult to explain why there is no mention of it at all. It was the menorah that replaced the Ark in the second temple.

The opposition against remaking the Ark triggered the speech in Jeremiah 3:17, according to which the city of Jerusalem shall become the throne of (the now invisible) Yhwh.

However, the idea in Jeremiah 3:16–17 that the Ark had been lost forever was not unanimously accepted. Second Maccabees 2:1 refers to a “book of Jeremiah”<sup>37</sup> in reporting that Jeremiah hid the Ark alongside other vessels of the Temple:

4 It was also contained in the same writing, how the prophet, being warned by God, commanded that the tabernacle and the Ark should accompany him, till he came forth to the mountain where Moses went up, and saw the inheritance of God. 5 And when Jeremiah came there, he found a hollow cave: and he put in there the tabernacle, and the Ark, and the altar of incense, and closed the door. 6 Then some of them that followed him, came up to mark the place: but they could not find it. 7 And when Jeremiah perceived it, he blamed them, saying: The place shall be unknown, till God gather together the congregation of the people, and receive them to mercy. 8 Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated.

The fact that 2 Maccabees attributes the hiding of the Ark to the prophet Jeremiah can be explained in a few different ways. First by the idea attested in rabbinic discussions that King Josiah hid the Ark (TB Yoma 52b),<sup>38</sup> and second – and probably more likely – as a *relecture* of Jeremiah 3:16–17 claiming that there is no need to remake the Ark because the prophet Jeremiah himself has hidden it!

The idea of the appearance of the Ark at the end of time is taken up in Revelations 11:19:

Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the Ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.<sup>39</sup>

The disappearance of the Ark, then, gave rise to all kinds of speculation. In the Islamic Hadiths, the *mahdi* will bring out the Ark from its hiding place at the end of time, which is sometimes in a cellar in Antioch and sometimes in the Sea of Galilee.

A very popular and well-known theory is that of the transfer of the Ark to Ethiopia. This tradition is found written for the first time in the *Kebra Nagast* ("The Book of the Glories of Kings"), which dates to the fourteenth century, but is probably based on an older tradition. This tradition reinterprets the biblical text of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon (1 Kings 10) by identifying Sheba with Ethiopia (although it is the kingdom of Sheba in Arabia, present-day Yemen). According to this text, the Queen of Sheba becomes pregnant by Solomon and gives birth to a son, whom she names Menelik. When he becomes an adult, Menelik learns who his father is and visits Solomon. However, he refuses to stay in Israel and become Solomon's successor; he is then anointed king of Ethiopia by the priest Sadoq. Solomon asks the sons of his generals and priests to accompany Menelik to Ethiopia and to stay there; Azariah, the son of Zadok who is part of this young group of people, does not want to be separated from the Ark. He then makes a copy of it and swaps it for the real Ark, which is brought to Ethiopia. This makes Menelik happy when he hears of this, as the Ethiopians have now become the chosen people of God and the Ethiopian kings have likewise become the successors of the kings of Israel and Judah. The Ark is brought to Axum, where it is believed even today to be housed in a chapel next to the main church. This theory of the Ark in Ethiopia haunted people until Indiana Jones, and even today speculations continue about the hidden place of the Ark<sup>40</sup> – but that is another story.

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### *Notes*

1. LXX uses for the Ark of Noah and the Ark of Yhwh the term κιβωτός, whereas the box of Moses is rendered with θίβις.
2. The two exceptions are Gen 50:26 (Joseph's coffin) and 2 Kgs 12:10–11 (2 Chr 24:8–11), where it designates a money chest.
3. For a listing of all terms see Jonker, "Ark of the Covenant," 410–11. LXX differs very often from the MT as to the designation of the Ark. This shows that these titles were not very "stable."
4. For an overview of Mowinckel's contributions to HB/OT scholarship in its biographical setting see Hjelde, *Sigmund Mowinckel*.
5. Mowinckel, "Le culte de Yahvé." For a discussion of this article, see Römer, "Sigmund Mowinckel."
6. On this, see also Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel*, 100, n. 57.
7. *Ibid.*, 200. Mowinckel does not envision this possibility, although he rightly observes that there was a representation of Asherah in the temple of Jerusalem.
8. *Ibid.*, 214–5. Mowinckel envisages the possibility that these stones were also used as oracles, and that one could identify them with the *ûrim* and *tummîm*.
9. *Ibid.*, 199.
10. *Ibid.*, 197.
11. Excerpts can be found in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 1.10.12–13.
12. Michel, *Palmyre*, 112–3.
13. A representation can be found in Layard, *The Monuments of Nineveh*, pl. 65.
14. Uehlinger, "Die Götter von Samarien," 763–5.
15. A later glossator added "fifty thousand men" (this gloss is missing in some manuscripts).
16. Rost, *Thronnachfolge Davids*. According to Rost, the story contained 1 Sam 4,1b–18a.19–21; 5,11–11b1.12; 6,1–3b1.4.10–14.16.19 – 7,1 and 2 Sam 6,1–15.17–20a.
17. See e. g. Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, 77 and 86; McCarter, *I Samuel*, 23–6.
18. The Greek text does not mention Samuel at all; the MT's version of 1 Sam 4:1 ("And the word of Samuel came to all Israel") is a later revision. In contrast to the Greek version, the MT attributes the initiative of the battle to the Israelites. This may be understood as a theological modification in order to explain that the Israelites lost the war and the Ark because they had not consulted Yhwh before waging war.
19. Schicklberger, *Die Ladeerzählungen*; Miller and Roberts, *Hand of the Lord*; Porzig, *Die Lade Jahwes*.
20. Schäfer-Lichtenberger, "Beobachtungen zur Ladegeschichte," 328.
21. For the reconstruction of the original narrative, see Finkelstein and Römer, "Historical and Archaeological Background."
22. "Against this city" is missing in LXX. This may be due to haplography, cf. Janzen, *Text of Jeremiah*, 119. For the opposite idea, according to which the references to the "city" should be considered as a proto-masoretic revision, cf. Stipp, *Sondergut des Jeremia-buches*, 103.

23. For the Talmudic references, see Haran, "Disappearance of the Ark," who claimed that the ark had been removed from the temple by Manasseh and was lost or destroyed.
24. Curtis and Madsen, *The Books of Chronicles*, 512–3.
25. Haran, "Disappearance of the Ark."
26. For an overview of different theories see Day, "What Happened."
27. This idea can be found in the rabbinic discussion, cf. Schäfer-Lichtenberger, "Verlust der Lade," 239–40.
28. Enstrom and van Dyk, "What happened?"; Day, "What Happened," 267–70.
29. The expression in brackets, missing in LXX\*, is a gloss that wants to specify where the nations will gather.
30. LXX and other manuscripts have a 3rd masc. pl. form, which is certainly a harmonization. Since v. 18 refers back to v. 14, the 2nd person makes perfect sense; cf. Römer, *Israels Väter*, 471.
31. Schäfer-Lichtenberger, "Verlust der Lade," 235.
32. Utzschneider, *Das Heiligtum*, 280–97.
33. Nihan, *From Priestly Torah*, 44–50.
34. Schäfer-Lichtenberger, "Verlust der Lade," 240–1.
35. See on this Römer, "Origin, Function and Disappearance," *forthcoming*.
36. Mowinckel, "Le culte de Yahvé," 211, n. 53.
37. This may be a reference to the Epistula Jeremiae or the Apocalypse of Jeremiah, cf. von Dobbeler, *Die Bücher 1/2 Makkabäer*, 173.
38. Weinfeld, "Jeremiah," 23–4.
39. For the Ark in the Quran and Islamic traditions, cf. Rubin, "Traditions in Transformation." For the hiding of the Ark, see *ibid.*, 212.
40. See the article of Arnaud, "L'arche d'alliance."

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