

Probing Question: Is the Ark of the Covenant real?

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Replica of the Ark of the Covenant in the Royal Arch Room of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. Credit Ben Schumin

When you hear the words "Ark of the Covenant" what comes to mind? For some, Steven Spielberg's film "Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark" provides the most vivid pop-culture reference to this mysterious sacred object.

The quest to find the real Ark has inspired generations of adventurers and Hollywood directors, but the trail has always gone cold. Is the Ark of the Covenant real?

"Different people will give you different answers to that question," said Baruch Halpern, Penn State professor of ancient [history](#), classics and

ancient Mediterranean studies, and religious studies. "The Ark is a regular feature in the Old Testament, making several appearances in the first five books of the [Bible](#). There are many consistent references to the Ark, and when you add it all up, it seems like the Ark was a real article."

According to scriptural accounts, Halpern said, the Ark is a box made from acacia wood, covered in gold and used as a container for the stone blocks bearing the Ten Commandments. Said to have been built at God's command, the Ark is believed to measure about 4 feet by 2 feet by 2.5 feet and features gold rings on the two long sides that hold the wooden poles used to carry it.

The top surface of the Ark is decorated with two cherubim, or angels, who crouch facing each other with wings outstretched, forming a seat. Believers say God himself occupies that seat, while the Ark served as a footstool, Halpern said.

There are references in other ancient texts of similar "containers" used to transport sacred relics, and the image of God sitting on the wings of cherubim with his feet resting on the Ark below fits with depictions of ancient kings, he said.

"It's also important to note that it wasn't just the Ark being carried into battle. YHWH, the name accorded the god of Israel in much of the Bible and later literature, accompanies the Ark into battle, giving it miraculous power," Halpern said.

There are many references to the awesome power of the Ark, he said. Various Bible stories describe how, during the exodus of the Israelites, the power of the Ark parted the river Jordan to allowing the people to pass. During the siege of Jericho, the Ark was toted around the city walls in a seven day procession accompanied by seven priests sounding seven trumpets - and made the city walls come tumbling down. The ferocity of

the Ark was so great that it had to be covered by a veil while being carried around, and could bring misfortune and tragedy on those who disrespected it.

Despite the powers it was said to possess, the Ark was eventually lost to the sands of time. The last Biblical mention of the Ark comes when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and plundered the temple where the Ark was stored, Halpern said. After this point, the fate of the Ark is the subject of much speculation.

One theory is that the Ark was captured by an Egyptian pharaoh, a tale that gave rise to the Raiders of the Lost Ark movie plot. Another possibility is that the Ark was hidden by priests under the Temple Mount for safekeeping, or spirited away to an unknown site before the Babylonians even arrived in Jerusalem. Other suggestions are that the Ark was removed by divine intervention, taken by an Ethiopian prince, or destroyed in battle.

"They're all fantasy, and we'll never really know which one is true," Halpern said. "Some theories seem more plausible than others. Was the Ark hidden from the Babylonians? Unlikely. Did the Babylonians take it? That theory is more probable."

Like Indiana Jones, some real-life scholar-adventurers are on the trail of the Ark, with one researcher claiming to have found the remnants of the Ark stored in a library in Zimbabwe. Could this be true?

In some ways, the story of the Ark is similar to other Judeo-Christian religious relics such as the Shroud of Turin and Noah's Ark, Halpern said. "You have to remember why this scripture was written in the first place, and see the Ark's symbolic power to people as a sacred object. If you try to over-explain it, you lose the power of the story."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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