

The Amazing, Surprising, Shocking, Unabridged Story of the Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant and its associated Mercy Seat stand as the most important elements of ancient Old Testament Judaism. More significantly, the Mercy Seat served as the focal point of Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement for ancient Israel—an annual celebration that pictured the nation of Israel's sins being covered before a holy God.

1. Origins at Mount Sinai and Construction

The story of the Ark of the Covenant begins in the land of Midian at the base of Mount Sinai. God delivered the nation of Israel from Egyptian bondage through a series of ten plagues—each more horrifying than the prior and each targeting a different Egyptian god with a single purpose: freeing the Israelites from the tyranny of Egypt to serve and worship Yahweh.

Next, the Lord led the nation through the wilderness to the Red Sea (Hebrew ***Yam Suf***). The nation marched through the depths of the Red Sea as if they were passing on dry ground. But, in that same ***Yam Suf***, Yahweh destroyed Pharaoh's army.

After parting the Red Sea and leading the nation through the wilderness with miraculous provisions of manna and water, Yahweh brought Israel to Mount Sinai (AKA Mt Horeb). Here, God entered into a covenant with the nation, giving them the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20) as well as many other laws and rules recorded in Exodus 21-23. The people repeatedly promised obedience. One example of the people's response:

> *7 Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." (Ex 24:7, ESV)*

Following this solemn covenant ratification, Yahweh directed Moses to have the people build a sanctuary so He could dwell in their midst:

> *8 And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. 9 Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it. (Ex 25:8–9, ESV)*

The first two pieces of sacred furniture commanded by God were the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat:

> *10 "They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, a cubit and a half its breadth, and a cubit and a half its height. 11 You shall overlay it with pure gold, inside and outside shall you overlay it, and you shall make on it a molding of gold around it. 12 You shall cast four rings of gold for it and put them on its four feet, two rings on the one side of it, and two rings on the other side of it. 13 You shall make poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. 14 And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark to carry the ark by them. 15 The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. 16 (Ex 25:10–15, ESV)*

The Ark was a wooden chest made of durable acacia (shittim) wood, overlaid inside and out with pure gold. Measuring approximately 3.75 feet long, 2.25 feet wide, and 2.25 feet high, it was fitted with golden rings and permanent carrying poles that were also made of shittim wood and overlaid with gold

The Ark was a rather unimposing, howbeit gold, covered box or trunk. On top of this box rested the Mercy Seat:

Next, Yahweh tell Moses:

> *17 "You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold. Two cubits and a half shall be its length, and a cubit and a half its breadth. 18 And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work shall you make them, on the two ends of the mercy seat. 19 Make one cherub on the one end, and one cherub on the other end. Of one piece with the mercy seat shall you make the cherubim on its two ends. 20 The cherubim shall spread out their wings above, overshadowing the mercy seat with their wings, their faces one to another; toward*

the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubim be. 21 And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. (Ex 25:17–21, ESV)

Here we see the people are commanded to make a ***"mercy seat"*** of pure gold. Literally, in the Hebrew it is the **kappōret**, (an ancient Hebrew word meaning **atonement**, **propitiation**, or to **cover**).

This golden lid was to be made of solid gold, it was to be a single hammered work that was made up of this lid and as a single piece were two Cherubim, the guardian angels of Eden after the fall. Here the guardian agents were to be placed on the lid of the mercy seat facing one another with their wings outstretched.

Although the mercy seat is a golden lid on a golden box, it is actually something much greater that than, especially in what it was picturing to the ancient Hebrew. Just looking slightly below the surface, we see that the Mercy Seat represents God's heavenly throne here on earth and the ark becomes the footstool to God's heavenly throne on earth. This is meant to represent God being with them, God abiding with them, God ruling from His earthly throne, in their presence! This is a beautiful picture!

Yahweh further tells Moses:

22 There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel. (Ex 25:17–22, ESV)

This is the place where the heavenly God will meet with His earthly people, this is the place where the heavenly God will speak to, guide, and direct His earthly people.

This is the place where Yahweh gill give commands to His people. This is the golden Ark of the Covenant and the golden Mercy Seat.

As a reminder: It is here on the (***kappōret***) that once a year the High Priest will sprinkle blood, both on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat, completing the annual national celebration of atonement (***Yom Kippur***).

2. Contents of the Ark and the Function of the Mercy Seat

Over time, three key items were placed inside the Ark, the golden urn holding manna, Aaron's staff that budded, and the two tables of the Covenant.

While the Ark housed these memorials, the Mercy Seat had one singular, all-important function: serving as the place where the High Priest sprinkled blood on the annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur):

Here is what ***Yom Kippur*** looked like as it connected with the Ark and the Mercy Seat:

14 And he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the mercy seat on the east side, and in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. 15 "Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. 16 Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. (Le 16:11–16, ESV).

This was the single function, the all-important function of the Mercy Seat. It was not a **trophy** to be shown off, it was not a **weapon** to be used on the battlefield. It was a piece of furniture to be placed in God's tabernacle that pictured the accomplishment of atonement through the shedding of blood. That was its single function.

Finally, there at Mt Sinai the construction was complete. The tabernacle and its furnishings all in place and we read this when the temple was inaugurated:

> *33 And he erected the court around the tabernacle and the altar, and set up the screen of the gate of the court. So Moses finished the work. The Glory of the Lord 34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 35 And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (Ex 40:33–35, ESV).*

Yahweh provided tangible proof that He would dwell in this temple and more specifically, it would be at the Ark of the Covenant where Yahweh would meet with the High Priest.

After nearly a year at Mt Sinai, the nation of Israel is ready to go in and take possession of the land promised them by Yahweh and so they began working their way to the border of the Promised Land.

3. Journey Through the Wilderness and Conquest

Before we discuss key points about the journey through the wildness it is important to highlight two points. First how they camped and second, how they marched.

First how they camped is outlined in Numbers 2 and how Israel marched, for they marched like an army, is described in (Numbers 2 and Numbers 10:11–33).

Looking at how the nation marched, what catches our attention is they were not protecting the Ark of the Covenant and Mercy Seat. They were being led by Ark of the Covenant.

Another point we need to discuss while we are here is how the Ark was prepared to be carried and how it was carried. When traveling, the Ark was never carried naked. It was carefully prepared by Aaron and his sons according to strict divine procedure.

First let's talk about the preparation:

> *5 When the camp is to set out, Aaron and his sons shall go in and take down the veil of the screen and cover the ark of the testimony with it. 6 Then they shall put on it a covering of goatskin and spread on top of that a cloth all of blue, and shall put in its poles (Nu 4:5–6, ESV).*

Prior to being moved the ark was first covered in three specific layers, and it is important to note that the priests were the ones who prepared the ark to be carried.

Once prepared for travel, the covered Ark of the Covenant was handed off to the Kohathites, a clan of Levi, that carried the sacred furnishings on their shoulders by the gold-overlaid poles which were never to be removed.

As the nation left Mt Sinai, and headed for the Promised Land, in Numbers 33, Moses catalogs 21 camps sites to get to the border of the Promised Land. The final camp site on the border of the Promised Land was Kadesh (Numbers 33:35).

It was from Kadesh, the Moses sent the 12 spies to spy out the land, 10 came back and gave a bad report, the people chose not to walk by faith, and thus for 40 years they wondered in the wilderness, moving, camping, and moving, until all the adults with the exception of Joshua and Caleb had perished.

Throughout this 40-year period, God guided them from the mobile golden throne and provided for them, so much so their shoes did not even wear out.

After the 40 years of wilderness wandering came to an end, God led the nation of Israel to the plains of Moab, this time they were located on the eastern side of the Jordan River, directly across from Jericho.

Rather than entering Canaan immediately from the southern border (which was their previous approach at Kadesh Barnea), this second arrival brought them to the eastern border of the Promised Land.

From this staging area on the eastern border, God led the nation across the Jordan River on dry ground into Canaan. As Israel enters the Promised Land, once again they crossed a water barrier, in this case it is the Jordan River, following the priests who were carrying the Ark:

> *14 So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, 15 and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water (now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest), 16 the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho. 17 Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan. (Josh 3:14–17, ESV)*

As the priests stepped into the Jordan it dammed up and the priests carrying the Ark worked their way to the midst of the Jordan and stood there, (on dry ground) until all Israel had passes through the Jordan.

Here, God leads His people as He displays His power and presence in the Ark of the Covenant.

The first city that had to be taken was Jericho. Although we do not know the exact year. The Exodus was **1446 BC**, the nation spent almost one year at Mt Sinai, then the travel time from Sinai to Kadesh Barnea, then the forty years of wandering, so at this point it is approximately **1405 BC.**

Here, with Israel in the Promised Land the nation of Israel encounters their first major city, a walled city, a fortified city that is sealed up. How will the nation defeat this walled, sealed up city? Here is what we read:

> *1 Now Jericho was shut up inside and outside because of the people of Israel. None went out, and none came in. 2 And the Lord said to Joshua, "See, I have given Jericho into your hand, with its king and mighty men of valor. 3 You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. 4 Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. 5 And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, when you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout, and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up, everyone straight before him." Joshua 6:1–5 (ESV)*

For six days they followed the outlined procedure, the people remained quiet, each day heading back to their camp after encircling the city.

Then the seventh day, they marched around the city seven times, and on the seventh lap, the priests blew their horns, the people shouted, and the God from his mobile throne brought down the walls of Jericho.

As the people continued the conquest of the Promised Land the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat are key fixtures. They people sought God's guidance and they were led by God Himself.

After the bulk of the Promised Land had been taken, in Joshua 18 and following, we read how Joshua divined the land to the twelve tribes.

When this happened, we are told the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant were located at Shiloh:

> *1 Then the whole congregation of the people of Israel assembled at Shiloh and set up the tent of meeting there. The land lay subdued before them. (Josh 18:1, ESV)*

Scholars believe the conquest took **6-7 years**. A good estimate of the year this took place is **1398ish BC.**

Joshua passes, which leads to the period of the judges, when ***"men did what was right in their own eyes."*** Throughout the turbulent period of the judges (approx. 1380–1050 BC), the Tabernacle along with the Ark of the Covenant remained in Shiloh.

During this time Shiloh was the central gathering place for the nation, it was where the annual feasts were held, it was where Hannah prayed for a son, it was where the young Samuel ministered to the Lord, all at **Shiloh**.

It was also during this time, that the priesthood became corrupted, It got so bad that people did not even want to go to Shiloh because of the wicked priests. Two such wicked priests who are named in the scriptures, both sons of Eli, are Hophni and Phineas.

It was also during this same time that Israel was warring against the Philistines at Ebenezer where they suffered a major defeat when they lost 4,000 soldiers to the Philistines.

In a desperate attempt to manipulate God, the Israelites brought the Ark onto the battlefield, almost like a magical charm. It seems they decided they could force God's hand to protect them and thus they would win the battle. The priests took the Ark out onto the battlefield and with it came Hophni and Phineas. The soldiers of Israel were initially excited when the ark entered the battlefield, while the Philistines were initially terrified when the ark entered the battlefield and then we read this:

> *10 So the Philistines fought, and Israel was defeated, and they fled, every man to his home. And there was a very great slaughter, for thirty thousand foot soldiers of Israel fell. 11 And the ark of God was captured, and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died. (1 Sam 4:10–11, ESV)*

The gamble failed catastrophically. Thirty-thousand soldiers fell, Hophni and Phinehas were killed, and the Ark of God was captured. **The unthinkable had happened!**

4. The Philistines captured the Ark of the Covenant.

The Philistines take the Ark from Ebenezer where they had captured it, to Ashdod, and placed it in the temple of their false god Dagon and in fact they set it beside Dagon, like a trophy.

The next morning the priest rise early in the morning, enter the temple, and they find Dagon, on the floor, face down, before the ark. (1 Samuel 5:3). So, the priests stand Dagon back up. (Just a thought: If your god needs help standing up, you need to find a new God).

The following day they came back into the temple and once again, Dagon was on his face before the golden box, except now his head and both of his hands were broken off. Dagon, the false god had been undone, destroyed, in his own temple, by the golden box. By the Ark of the Covenant.

Then we read this:

> *6 The hand of the Lord was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. (1 Sam 5:6, ESV)*

A plague that likely involved rats spreads throughout the town. The men of Ashdod decided that the golden box could not remain there, it was too hard on them. They were suffering while the Ark was in their town. The Philistine Lords assembled and the decision was made to send the Ark to Gath (a different Philistine city).

Once in Gath, the hand of Yahweh was once again hard against the people, a great fear and panic fell on the people, they too were afflicted with tumors, likely brought about by a similar plague that was in Ashdod. So, the decision was made to send the ark to Ekron (another Philistine city).

In Ekron the people cried out as soon as the ark arrived, shouting that the leaders had sent it there to kill the them.

A great panic went throughout the entire city. God's hand was heavy on the people, and once again the people were struck with tumors and many died. In total, Golden Box was in Philistines country for seven months (1 Samuel 6:1) and it wreaked havoc across three Philistine cities.

Then we read this in 1 Samuel:

> *2 And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." 3 They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you." (1 Sa 6:2–3, ESV).*

The Philistine priests further directed that as guilt offerings they should include five golden tumors and five golden mice according to the number of Philistine Lords. They prepared a new cart and hooked to the cart two milks cows, cows that had never pulled a cart, cows that were still nursing calves.

They took the calves of the two milk cows back home. The goal was to use the calves to see if the cows would turn towards them or towards the boarder of Israel. Knowing that if they turned towards their calves this whole seven-month disaster was just a coincident and if they went towards Israel, then it was all the hand of God.

Rather than going towards their calves, the milk cows proceeded down the road towards the border of Israel. The people of Beth-shemesh work working in the fields, and they saw the cart coming, with the ark, and they rejoiced greatly!

The cart stopped in the field of Joshua in Beth-shemesh. Levites took the Ark down from the cart, but some men looked into the Ark and Yahweh struck down 70 men. After that happened the men of the city were afraid and so they sent to Kiriath-Jearim asking for people to come down and take the Ark for themselves.

The men of Kiriath-jearim came and took the ark and brought it to the **house of Aminadab**. According to (1 Samuel 7:2) the Ark of the Covenant stayed in Kiriath-jearim for ***"some twenty years."*** This 20-year period likely coincided with Samuel's deliverance of the nation from the Philistines (approximately **1070-1050 BC**).

But do not miss the point. The Ark of the covenant was simply forgotten, left in the house of Aminadab. Worship and approach to Yahweh seemingly ignored.

Meanwhile the nation cried out for a king like the surrounding nations, and Saul, a Benjamite, became the first king of Israel. Saul ruled for 40 years, but it was a very turbulent time for the nation.

5. Davidic Recovery and Solomon's Temple

Sometime after David became king, he purposed in his heart to go and get the ark:

> *13 David consulted with the commanders of thousands and of hundreds, with every leader. 2 And David said to all the assembly of Israel, "If it seems good to you and from the Lord our God, let us send abroad to our brothers who remain in all the lands of Israel, as well as to the priests and Levites in the cities that have pasturelands, that they may be gathered to us. 3 Then let us bring again the ark of our God to us, for we did not seek it in the days of Saul." (1 Ch 13:1–3, ESV).*

This provides a bit of shocking information. During Saul's entire (40-year reign), it seems he left the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat in Kiriath-Jearim. The Ark sat for 20 years during the close of the judges. Then Saul came on the scene as king, he reigned 40 years and the Ark of the Covenant sat, ignored and forgotten.

But then, David, the shepherd king, the King after God's own heart, takes men, he goes to Kiriath-Jearim, with them with the plan to bring Ark of God from Kiriath-jearim to the city of David (1 Chronicles 13:5).

David and the men proceed to Kiriath-Jearim, they place the ark on a new cart (after all, that worked for the Philistines), and they began moving the Ark to the city of David. **Uzzah** and **Ahio** (sons of Abinadab) are "driving" the cart.

Pause… Does that name (Abinadab) sound familiar? Yes, these are men who were raised in the home where the ark had set for 60 years or so. We can imagine that they were very familiar with being around the Ark. The sons of Abinadab were driving the cart and David and all the house of Israel were celebrating and singing.

When the oxen came to the threshing floor of Chidon, the oxen stumbled and Uzza, (a son of Abinadab) reached out his hand to steady the ark, and he touched it, and God struck him dead. **Instantly!**

At first David became angry, then we read this:

> *9 And David was afraid of the Lord that day, and he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" 10 So David was not willing to take the ark of the Lord into the city of David. But David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. (2 Sa 6:9–10, ESV)*

So, the ark remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite for **three months** and during this time, God blessed his entire household!

During this time, we are right to suspect that David studied the Old Testament or at least consulted with some Levites and learned how Yahweh had dictated that the Ark was to be moved. Not with a cart, but carried on the shoulders of Levites (more specifically Kohathites). So, David gathered priests to carry Ark and after much fanfare and many sacrifices the Ark was delivered to the city of David.

Then we are told this:

> *17 And they brought in the ark of the Lord and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it. And David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the Lord. 18 And when David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts 19 and distributed*

David set up a special tent on Mt Zion, the Tent of David, just for the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat.

Somewhere along the line Shiloh had been abandoned and the tabernacle had been moved to Gibeon. Equally we read that of David:

> *39 And he left Zadok the priest and his brothers the priests before the tabernacle of the Lord in the high place that was at Gibeon 40 to offer burnt offerings to the Lord on the altar of burnt offering regularly morning and evening, to do all that is written in the Law of the Lord that he commanded Israel. (1 Ch 16:39–40, ESV)*

Thus, for reasons we may never fully understand, David does not reconnect the Ark of the Covenant with the Tabernacle, but instead places it in the tent of David and creates a new worship center in Jerusalem.

Then David purposed in his heart to build a cedar house for Yahweh. Although David was prevented from building a house for Yahweh, (because he had shed much blood), Yahweh promised that of David He would raise up one who would build the house of Yahweh and Yahweh would establish his kingdom forever. Of course, these promises find their ultimate and final fulfillment in the Messiah.

Ultimately Solomon rose in power and became the next king of Israel and in the fourth year of his reign he launched a seven-year building project to construct a house for Yahweh. In the **480th** year after the people had left

the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign (**966 BC**) in the month of Ziv (second month) Solomon began to build the house for Yahweh.

He lined the walls of the house in cedar from Lebanon, then overlaid them with gold. Even the floor was covered in gold. The entire interior of Solomon's temple, was overlaid with gold.

Then, in the 11th year of his reign, in the 8th month the temple was completed. **Thus, it took seven years to build and involved over 180,000 laborers and was completed in (959 BC).**

Then Solomon assembled all the leaders, the elders, the heads of the tribes, to bring the ark and place it in the Holy of Holies in the new temple. This is where we read last week, that by this time, the only thing still in the ark was the **two tablets of stone.**

The priest carried the ark into the new Holy of Holies and we read this:

> *10 And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, 11 so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord. (1 Ki 8:10–11, ESV)*

The ark is finally home, it is finally in its **rightful resting place.**

Solomon built this beautiful house, but some of the Judean kings who came after him profaned this house. There were a number of wicked kings followed Solomon, one particularly evil king was Manasseh (**687-642 BC**).

This is just part of what we read about this wicked king:

> *5 And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. (2 Kings 21:5)*

If we understand this right, he put idols in the Holy Place and in the Holy of Holies. King Manasseh was followed by his wicked son, Amon, who only reigned for two years (**642-640BC**).

Then a good king ascends the throne (his name was Josiah) (**640-609BC**). Unfortunately, we know from history he was the last of the good kings to rule in Judah.

Josiah reestablished worship and religious festivals and then we read something that is still debated by scholars:

> *2 He appointed the priests to their offices and encouraged them in the service of the house of the Lord. 3 And he said to the Levites who taught all Israel and who were holy to the Lord, "Put the holy ark in the house that Solomon the son of David, king of Israel, built. You need not carry it on your shoulders. Now serve the Lord your God and his people Israel. (2 Chr 35:2–3, ESV)*

Had the ark been moved from the Holy Place during the reign of the wicked kings Manasseh and Amon and Josiah was commanding the Levites to bring it back. That is what some speculate, but we do not know for sure.

Interesting note: In 2 Maccabees, which is an extra-biblical, non-canonical (Apocryphal) book, we read something that it claims the prophet Jeremiah did:

> *4 It was also in the writing that the prophet, having received an oracle, ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. 5 And Jeremiah came and found a cave, and he brought there the tent and the ark and the altar of incense, and he sealed up the entrance. 6 Some of those who followed him came up to mark the way, but could not find it. 7 When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: "The place shall be unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. (2 Mac 2:4-8, RSV)*

This is not recorded in the Scriptures and is likely religious feel-good literature, but I wanted you to be aware of it.

The Claim is the Jeremiah (who was called to be a prophet in **627 BC** and served for 40 years), hid the Ark when he saw the impending Fall of Jerusalem.

6. The Destruction of Solomon's Temple

Then, in **586 BC**, in the fifth month, on the 10th day of the month, following an 18 month siege, the wall around Jerusalem was breached, the city was taken, the temple was looted, burned with fire, and destroyed.

Many of the riches and elements of the temple were taken to Babylon. We find an inventory of the items in (II Kings 25 and Jeremiah 52). In those two lists, guess what we do not find. There is no mention of any of the golden furniture of the temple. The Ark of the Covenant is conspicuously missing from the inventory of temple spoils taken to Babylon.

Following the 70-year Babylonian captivity, King Cyrus issues a decree to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1:2-3). He releases the prisoners and charges them to go back and rebuild Yahweh's house at Jerusalem.

Also, when Ezra catalogs everything that Cyrus the King gave them to take back to Jerusalem, there is no mention of the Ark of the Covenant or the Mercy Seat (Ezra 1). It is like they have simply vanished from the planet. They were mentioned hundreds of times previously and now not mentioned at all.

Ultimately the Temple was rebuilt in **516BC**, but it was not nearly as grand or as glorious as Solomon's temple.

What of the Holy of Holies? What was behind the veil? The Bible never says a word one way or the other.

But I do want you to see what it says in the Mishna in Yoma 5:2. In 5:1 the author explains what the High Priest did on the Day of Atonement in relationship to the Ark and incense. Then in the next verse Yoma 5:2 it says this:

> *"After the Ark was taken into exile, there was a rock in the Holy of Holies from the days of the early prophets, David and Samuel, who laid the groundwork for construction of the Temple, and this stone was called the foundation rock. It was three fingerbreadths higher than the ground, and the High Priest would place the incense on it."*

This Mishna is not Scripture, but we have no reason to believe it would indicate that following the Babylonian destruction the Ark was not present in the Holy of Holies, unless the Ark was not present in the Holy of Holies!

At this point most scholars agree that something happened around **586BC**. Several theories attempt to account for its disappearance:
1. Destruction: The gold plating was stripped and the wooden core burned during the 586 BC sack.
2. Babylonian Exile: It was secretly taken to Babylon but omitted from the records.
3. Concealment: Prophets like Jeremiah hid the Ark prior to the siege—an account preserved in the extra-biblical text 2 Maccabees 2:4–8.

Regardless of the historical mechanism, the earthly Ark **vanished** from the pages of history. It would seem that the most sacred article of Ancient Biblical Judaism went missing around **586BC** and simply vanished from the pages of **Scripture** and **history.**

That might be the full story, but there are a few other things I want to say in wrapping us up.

7. New Testament Fulfillment: Christ as the True Mercy Seat

Centuries before its disappearance, the prophet Jeremiah said something that no doubt shocked the Old Covenant Hebrew. Please listen to what he wrote, for he promised of a coming time when:

> *15 " 'And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. 16 And when you have multiplied and been fruitful in the land, in those days, declares the*

Lord, they shall no more say, "The ark of the covenant of the Lord." It shall not come to mind or be remembered or missed; it shall not be made again. (Jer 3:15–16, ESV)

Although Scholars disagree on when this prophecy will be fulfilled, it is clear that a time was coming (after **600AD**ish) when among other things, the Ark would not be missed or even remembered! He did not say it would be found or rebuilt, rather he said something shocking, rather it would be **forgotten**!

The mobile throne of God, forgotten! Jeremiah prophesied of a day when something more **significant** and more **glorious** would come that would cause the Hebrews to forget about the **Ark**.

It is here, I would like to connect us back to the book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews has been telling us over and over again the tabernacle, the furnishing, the ceremonies, were all shapes, shadows, dim pictures of a much **grander** and **greater reality.**

The Ark was not the destination, it was always pointing forward. The blood-stained mercy seat was always pointing to something greater. Here is what we read in the last book of the Bible:

19 Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. (Rev 11:19)

The earthly copy was just that, **earthly** and a **copy**. The permanent was always in heaven. The temporary was always pointing forward, pointing to the true Ark and Mercy Seat in Heaven!

There beginning in **1445 BC** the nation of Israel began practicing an annual celebration where blood was applied to the top of that golden box, the Mercy Seat, the ***kappōret,*** (meaning cover, make atonement, or make propitiation). But it pictured a much more amazing truth. Theologically, it was the focal point of Israel's national atonement—the place where the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled on Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:14–15) and where God promised to meet with His people.

Blood was required to cover the broken law. The entire tabernacle was built to house that box. The entire Holy of Holies was built to house **this solemn event.** It was all built to teach this lesson. But, the blood of bulls and goats could never atone for men and women's sins. **It was a ceremony pointing forward to something much greater!**

I will end this week, with something I brought up last week. When the translators translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek (The Septuagint), when they encountered the Hebrew word ***kappōret,*** (meaning mercy seat) they translated it into Greek using the Greek word ***Hilastērion***.

Paul picks up this very Greek word **to describe Christ:**

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. (Rom 3:21–25, ESV)

I do not believe Paul is speaking metaphorically, rather he is declaring that **Jesus is the true Mercy Seat.**

In closing, I want to take us back to Easter Sunday morning, following the crucifixion of Jesu. John records this: *"11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet." (Joh 20:11-12)*

Have you ever wondered why the Mercy Seat looks like it does? Could it be that it depicted what Mary would see thousands of years later? The **True Mercy Seat of God**, the place where atonement was accomplished!