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Abstract Review of *The Lost Ark of the Covenant: The Remarkable Quest for the Legendary Ark* (2008), by Tudor Parfitt.

Ark of the Covenant . . . Again

John A. Tvedtnes

Review of Tudor Parfitt. *The Lost Ark of the Covenant: The Remarkable Quest for the Legendary Ark*. London: Harper Element, 2008 (American edition: *The Lost Ark of the Covenant: Solving the 2,500 Year Old Mystery of the Fabled Biblical Ark*). xi + 388 pp. $25.95.

In an earlier review,[1] I surveyed various claims that the ark of the covenant had been rediscovered in modern times. There are obvious problems when different people in different geographical locations, from Ireland to Jerusalem to Ethiopia, claim that they have the ark. A new claim extends the discovery into southern Africa.

Tudor Parfitt of the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies believes that the ark made its way to the region of South Africa and Zimbabwe. He explains his theory in a new book, *The Lost Ark of the Covenant*, and its accompanying film documentary, *Quest for the Lost Ark*, which aired on the History Channel in March 2008. Intrigued, but doubtful of the validity of such claims, I watched the television program and took notes.

No Gold for the Ark

Parfitt rejects other claims for the location of the ark, though he does not discuss the more recent ones I mentioned in my previous

1. John A. Tvedtnes, "Finders of the Lost Ark," *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 283–94.

review. Most importantly, he rejects the usual biblical description of the ark as a box of acacia (shittim) wood covered with gold and topped by cherubim with outstretched wings (Exodus 25:10–22; 37:1–9). He notes that the account in Deuteronomy 10:3 has Moses saying, "And I made an ark of shittim wood," with no mention of the gold overlay and the cherubim. This suggested to Parfitt that the real ark was made of wood alone and that the Exodus account embellished not only the story, but the description of the ark as well.

Parfitt rejects the Exodus account because, while shittim wood is available in the Sinai desert, gold is not. Where, then, did they get the gold? Parfitt leaves the question unanswered, neglecting to address the account in Exodus 3:22, where Moses tells the Israelites, "But every woman shall borrow [Hebrew "ask"][2] of her neighbour, and of her that sojourneth in her house, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment: and ye shall put them upon your sons, and upon your daughters; and ye shall spoil the Egyptians" (see also Exodus 11:2; 12:35–36). In the desert, Moses asked the Israelites to donate their gold, silver, and brass jewelry for the adornment of the tabernacle (Exodus 25:3; 35:5, 22).

Had there been no gold available to the Israelites for making the tabernacle, it follows that they also could not have made any of the gold and gold-covered implements of the tabernacle and high-priestly vestments described in the book of Exodus.[3] This would invalidate the entire account of the building of the tabernacle, including the work of the metalsmith Bezaleel, who manufactured the ark and other metallic implements for that structure.[4] Parfitt seems not to have realized the effect of his thesis.

While Moses was atop the mountain, being instructed of the Lord how to build the tabernacle and its furniture, the people grew restless and demanded that Moses's brother Aaron make them a graven image

2. This is the same verb rendered "lent" in the King James rendition of Exodus 12:36.

3. Exodus 25–28, 30–31, 36–37, 39–40.

4. Exodus 31:2–4; 35:30–32; 36:1–2; 37:1; 38:22; 2 Chronicles 1:5. Exodus 38:24 gives the precise weight of the gold that was used in the construction of the tabernacle and its furniture.

to worship. The future high priest collected from them gold earrings with which to make the golden calf.[5] Parfitt's view would, of necessity, negate this account as well, though he does not address the issue.

To his credit, Parfitt interviewed Shimon Gibson of the Albright Institute in Jerusalem, who expressed the opinion that the Babylonians, who destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC, would have stripped the gold off the ark and burned the wooden box with the rest of the wood found inside the temple.[6] Gibson's point is well taken, but it seems more likely to me that the gold of the ark would have been taken by Shishak during his attack on Jerusalem and his plunder of the temple treasury in the time of Solomon's son Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25–26). Edwin Brock, also interviewed on camera for Parfitt's film, noted that neither Shishak's record nor the Bible mentions the ark of the covenant being taken, suggesting that it remained in the temple after that time. Shishak's extant record, carved on a wall of the Egyptian temple at Karnak, while listing Shishak's Syro-Palestinian military expedition, does not expressly mention his attack on Jerusalem and its temple, so one should not expect the record to detail the plunder.

Other Theories

Parfitt deals with a few of the more prominent theories regarding the location of the ark. An Ethiopian text, the *Kebra Nagast*, has the queen of Sheba bearing King Solomon a son named Menelik, who as an adult returned to Jerusalem and made off with the ark of the covenant and brought it to Ethiopia, where it is said to reside in the Church of St. Mary of Zion in Axum. Parfitt dismisses this account on grounds that the ark was known to have been in the temple some four centuries after the time of Solomon. He seems to base this view on Jeremiah 3:16, where we read that "in those days, saith the Lord, they shall say no more, The ark of the covenant of the Lord: neither shall

5. Exodus 32:2–4, 23–24; see also verse 31.

6. I was a bit dismayed that Parfitt's film illustrated the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem with a panel from Nineveh (now in the British Museum) depicting the capture of the Judean city of Lachish by the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701 BC, more than a century earlier.

it come to mind: neither shall they remember it; neither shall they visit it; neither shall that be done any more." The passage, however, does not say that the ark was still in situ in Jeremiah's day when the Babylonians attacked Jerusalem.

Parfitt likewise dismisses (rightly, in my opinion) ideas that the ark was taken into Egypt and hidden at the bottom of a lake, in the Great Pyramid, or under the sphinx at Giza (both structures predate the exodus by many centuries).[7] He attributes such speculations to the popularity of the 1981 Indiana Jones motion picture *Raiders of the Lost Ark* but also brings up what he calls a "rumor" of the smuggling of the ark to a Jewish temple on the island of Elephantine in the middle of the Nile River. He rightly points out that the temple is too late in time but seems unaware of another Jewish temple at the Egyptian site of Leontopolis. His main reason for not wanting to place the ark at Elephantine is that false gods were also worshipped at the site and that Israelite priests would not have placed the ark in proximity to pagan idols. He seems to forget (or not to know) that pagan worship was occasionally carried on in the Jerusalem temple.[8] The modern mind may find such goings-on unlikely, but in the Bible we are dealing with ancient peoples with a different mind-set.

7. My personal favorite on the Ark-in-Egypt "Do Not Read" list is Graham Hancock's *The Sign and the Seal: The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), which is undoubtedly fascinating to the layman but clearly full of errors to anyone acquainted with ancient history. For example, Hancock, supposedly having exhausted all other possible identifications of the slain Master Mason Hiram Abiff, is led to believe that he should be identified with the Egyptian king Seqenenre Tao II, whose mummy, lying in the Cairo Museum (where I saw it in 1978), shows a large wound to the skull that must have been the cause of his death. In Masonic tradition, Hiram Abiff was the builder of Solomon's temple. Indeed, the Bible names one Hiram as the chief architect of that structure and describes him as an Israelite, not an Egyptian pharaoh (1 Kings 7:13–40). One need not look beyond the Bible for the origin of the Masonic hero.

8. Jewish king Ahaz ordered the installation of a Syrian-style altar in the temple to be used for divination, and he mutilated other temple implements constructed during the time of Solomon (2 Kings 16:10–16). His son, Hezekiah, restored the temple to its original condition (2 Chronicles 29) and also removed Moses's brazen serpent from the temple after people began worshipping it (2 Kings 18:4). A century later, idols had been erected in the temple and people began worshipping both the sun and other false gods (see 2 Chronicles 36:14; Jeremiah 7:30; Ezekiel 8:5–18; 20:30–31, 39–40; 44:7).

Parfitt also rejects the view, unsupported by any written evidence, that the Knights Templar found the ark beneath the temple mount in Jerusalem and brought it back in secret to Europe.[9] Still, he took time to accompany Gibson into Zedekiah's Cave (also called Solomon's Quarry) beneath the Old City of Jerusalem to get a feel for the view that the ark was hidden beneath the temple—a view he rejected. I was also surprised that he even discussed the Copper Scroll, found in Qumran Cave 3, which lists temple treasures hidden away prior to the Roman destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70. The text engraved on the scroll does not name the ark, and it is far too late in time to even be considered in a search for the sacred box.[10]

The Lemba Theory

Ultimately, Parfitt concludes that the ark of the covenant was taken to South Africa via Yemen and resided with the Lemba tribe. He had first encountered the Lemba during a visit to the region to lecture on the Falasha or "Black Jews" of Ethiopia following the publication of his book on the Falasha emigration to Israel. Some of the Lemba told him that they, too, were descended from ancient Israelites who came to Africa. Even though many of them were Christians, they retained Jewish practices (including circumcision) and worked in metal and pottery.

Following the discovery that a large percentage of Jewish men claiming descent from Aaron, Israel's first high priest, shared a common genetic marker on the Y-chromosome, Parfitt suggested testing of the Lemba. The results demonstrated that the Lemba did, indeed, have Israelite ancestry, and that the Cohen Modal Haplotype was

9. The Knights Templar were a monastic order of knights originally founded to provide safe passage to Christian holy sites for European pilgrims to the Holy Land. In recent years, much conjecture has tied them to Freemasonry and various secrets supposedly uncovered on the temple compound during their sojourn there. However intriguing such accounts may be, they are mere speculation, with little or no evidence to support them.

10. I was delighted, however, that Parfitt noted that the biblical description of the ark, with the two staves to carry it, resembles the box-shrines used to carry statues of the gods in ancient Egypt, as many earlier scholars have already noted. This, however, was overshadowed by his later identification of the ark with a drum, as described later in this review.

more pronounced among the Buba clan, descendants of the priests who are said to have led the people from Jerusalem.[11]

According to their tradition, the Lemba people immigrated from Jerusalem at the time of the Babylonian conquest and came via Yemen, in the southwestern Arabian peninsula.[12] Parfitt hyperbolically claims that this origin has been "proven."[13] Yemenite Jews say that they were led there by the prophet Jeremiah (a priest, according to Jeremiah 1:1), who in some ancient texts is credited with hiding the ark on Mount Nebo in a cave near where Moses was thought to be buried.[14]

The Lemba tradition holds that they traveled from oasis to oasis (including Petra) through ancient Arabia. Parfitt refers to "countless Arab legends" that claim that the ark traveled through that region and notes that some Arab historians say it was discovered on Mount Meba by the Jurum tribe, who brought it to Mecca, and that it was later transferred south to Yemen. Dhu Nuwas, one of the kings of Yemen, is said to have actually converted to Judaism, but was overthrown by Christian rivals, after which Islam arose in the region. Parfitt speculates that the pre-Islamic prophet Hud, whose grave is still shown in the eastern Hadramaut and who is mentioned in the Qur'an, may reflect the name *Yahud*, "Jew."[15]

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11. The haplotype is not restricted to Jewish priests (Cohanim), though they have it in larger proportion than others. Non-priestly Jews also have the haplotype in lesser proportion and non-Jews in even lesser proportion still. It is possible that some priestly families lost their traditional origins and that some even abandoned Judaism in the past. Among the Lemba, 53 percent of Buba men have the haplotype, compared to 9 percent of the men of other clans. The Lemba DNA studies were conducted in 1995 by Trevor Jenkins of the South African Institute for Medical Research at the University of the Witwatersrand.

12. Significantly, Lehi and his family also left Jerusalem shortly before the Babylonian conquest and evidence has demonstrated that they, too, traveled through the Arabian peninsula to the ocean, where they built a ship and sailed to the New World.

13. Some geneticists have suggested that the Lemba picked up the "Cohen gene" from Jewish Portuguese sailors (some of them perhaps secret Jews) who sailed down the east coast of Africa, rather than from Jews living in Yemen. The time depth (said to be three thousand years) can be accommodated by either view.

14. *4 Baruch* 3:7–19; 2 Maccabees 2:1–8; *Chronicles of Jerahmeel* 77:4–9; *Lives of the Prophets* 2:11–19.

15. Though Parfitt knew of Hud from the Qur'an, he seems not to have known that the story of the breaking of the great dam in Yemen is also mentioned in that volume, where it is said that it was God's way of destroying and scattering sinners shortly before

The Lemba "Ark"

The Lemba claim that they left Yemen for Africa, taking the ark of the covenant with them. Called the *mgoma lungundu*, "drum that thunders," it was carried on poles by priests and was said to be the voice of God, which paralyzed one's enemies. Parfitt managed to track down the drum itself. It had been photographed and published in 1952 in a book written by Harold von Sicard, who gave the drum to the Bulawayo Museum in Zimbabwe. Political problems prevented Parfitt from going to film the drum itself, though he had previously examined it. Parfitt arranged for a Zimbabwean crew to film the device as it was removed from storage and send the film to South Africa.

The drum appears very old and damaged but bears evidence that it was once carried about by poles. Radiocarbon dating performed some time earlier disclosed that it was some six hundred years old. The Lemba claimed that it had replaced an earlier drum. Parfitt speculates that the ark of the covenant may have originally been a drum, a weapon of war also carried in processions. Shimon Gibson disagrees with the speculation that the Israelites' ark was used as a drum, noting that the Lemba "ark" had always been a drum.

Drum or Box?

However, that the original ark of the covenant was carried into battle is beyond question (1 Samuel 4:3–8). Early in its history, when the ark was taken up and carried before the people, "Moses said, Rise up, Lord, and let thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate thee flee before thee" (Numbers 10:35). On one occasion, when the Israelites went against their enemies without the ark, they were defeated (Numbers 14:44–45).[16]

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the time of Muhammad (sixth century AD). Parfitt says that the last time he was in the region, he "heard about" a dam in the Sana'a area and noted that if the dam had broken, people living there would have had to leave.

16. They were also defeated when the ark accompanied them into battle against the Philistines, who captured the ark but later returned it after it had caused considerable damage in some of their temples (1 Samuel 4:10–11; 6:1–7:2).

When the priests bearing the ark came to the Jordan River and stepped into it, the waters of the river were stopped upstream so the people could cross over into the land of Canaan (Joshua 3–4). The purpose of this miracle[17] seems to have been to frighten the people of the land: "And Joshua said, Hereby ye shall know that the living God is among you, and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Hivites, and the Perizzites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Jebusites" (Joshua 3:10). Soon afterward, the ark was carried with the people as they circumambulated the city of Jericho for a week, resulting in the collapse of its walls (Joshua 6:6–8). Does this mean that the ark was a drum that produced sufficient vibration to cause the walls of Jericho to fall or to frighten Israel's enemies?

The Hebrew word *aron*, rendered "ark," means "box,"[18] and the *aron* was, indeed, like the ancient Egyptian box-shrines, replete with the two "staves" placed through rings to enable priests to carry it on their shoulders.[19] The Bible informs us that various things were placed inside the ark, such as the "the two tables of stone" received by Moses atop the mountain[20] and a "book of the law."[21] The biblical description is clearly that of a box, not a drum.

But the ark was far more than a mere box; it was also the Lord's throne. The lid of the box, the *kapporet* (misrendered "mercy seat" in

17. While it is true that the Jordan River has frequently stopped flowing due to the collapse of its banks upriver at present-day Damiyah (the city of Adam in Joshua 3:16), the timing of the event was clearly miraculous.

18. This is the word used to denote the "ark" of the covenant. The term rendered "ark" in the Noah story is *tebah*, a borrowing from Egyptian that is cognate to the term used by the Ethiopians (whose language, like Hebrew, is in the Semitic family) to denote the ark they claim to have in their possession. I use the word "claim" because only the priest in charge of the shrine at Axum is allowed to see this ark; representations of it, usually in the form of flat wooden boards, are carried in procession during religious festivals.

19. Exodus 25:10–15; 1 Kings 8:7–8; 2 Chronicles 5:8–9.

20. Exodus 25:16, 21; 34:1, 4; 1 Kings 8:9; 2 Chronicles 5:10.

21. Deuteronomy 31:25–26. Hebrews 9:4 informs us that it contained "the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant." This late description may be inaccurate.

KJV) was made of gold and topped by two cherubim, one on each end.[22] "And the cherubims shall stretch forth their wings on high, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and their faces shall look one to another; toward the mercy seat shall the faces of the cherubims be" (Exodus 25:20; see vv. 17–20). The Lord promised Moses, "And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony, of all things which I will give thee in commandment unto the children of Israel" (Exodus 25:22). Indeed, we read that the Lord sat (*yashab*, rendered "dwelleth" in KJV) between these cherubim.[23] "And when Moses was gone into the tabernacle of the congregation to speak with him, then he heard the voice of one speaking unto him from off the mercy seat that was upon the ark of testimony, from between the two cherubims: and he spake unto him" (Numbers 7:89).

The description of winged cherubim atop a seat is very much like thrones known from parts of the ancient Near East. Egyptian kings sometimes sat on a throne that had wings that formed armrests on either side, and a carved piece of ivory found at the site of Megiddo and dating to ca. 1200 BC depicts a Canaanite king seated on a winged throne. Accepting Parfitt's theory means one must reject entirely the biblical description of the ark, which fits well in its ancient Near Eastern milieu. It is therefore ironic that the starting point for Parfitt's search for the "lost ark" is the Bible, on whose accounts of the ark he casts so much doubt.

22. The Hebrew term was borrowed from Akkadian and denotes winged animals (often bulls) such as one finds depicted in Assyrian and Babylonian reliefs, as also in Egyptian art. These were the winged creatures described in the heavenly visions of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:5–11, 23–25; 3:13; 10:5–22; 11:22), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:2), and the apostle John (Revelation 4:6–9; cf. D&C 77:2–4). Though the KJV often places the plural *–s* suffix, the *–im* of the Hebrew already denotes plurality.

23. 1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chronicles 13:6; Psalms 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16.