The Ark of the Covenant

10 Minute Bible History
The Presence of God

The Ark of the Covenant is one of the greatest mysteries the world has ever known. But what was it? Did it wield unstoppable power to whoever possessed it, like in the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark?" The Bible reveals that the Ark of the Covenant was where God set up his throne upon the earth, and the place where his Presence appeared among his people Israel. In the ancient encampment of the tribes of Israel the Ark of the Covenant was located right in the midst of all his people, and the Bible says that this has always been God's plan, to dwell in the heart of his people.
The Ark of the Covenant was a small box that contained the actual Ten Commandments written by the finger of God. The Ark first appeared in the Bible during the time of Moses around 1500 BC, after the Israelites had escaped Egypt through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. They were led by the mysterious Shekinah Glory cloud, which looked like a tornado during the day and pillar of fire during the night. This glory cloud led the Israelites all the way to Mt. Sinai where God gave them his Ten Commandments, even though there was rebellion brewing in their hearts. It was here on Mt. Sinai that God revealed to Moses the detailed description of the Ark of the Covenant.
Biblical Description

The Ark was to be made of Acacia wood and coated entirely with gold. The dimensions were 3.9 feet long and 2.3 feet wide and tall, and along its top edge was a king's crown fashioned in solid gold. There were gold rings with long poles of wood overlaid with gold for transporting the Ark.
The Mercy Seat

The Lid on top of the Ark was called the Mercy Seat and standing on top were two angelic beings called Cherubim with their wings outstretched and they faced each other as they looked down at the blood of a sacrifice which was sprinkled on the top of the lid by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. The Cherubim were hammered into shape from one block of solid gold. They had four faces as described in Ezekiel's vision in Ez. 1:5, they had the face of a lion, the face of an eagle, the face of an ox, and the face of a man. The Cherubim were also the same fierce creatures who guarded the entrance to the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve had sinned. They wielded a flaming sword that turned in all four directions to protect the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:24).
In the Bible God said to Moses:

“There I will meet with you, and I will tell you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the covenant, all that I command you for the children of Israel.”

—Exodus 25:22

The Ark of the Covenant was located in the Tabernacle, which was God's sanctuary.
The Tabernacle was a portable sanctuary that the tribes of Israel encamped around as they journeyed through the wilderness. The Ark of the Covenant was placed behind the veil in the Holy of Holies, a small room that contained nothing except the Ark of the Covenant. God also appeared above the Ark and between the Cherubim when he spoke to Moses.
The History of Israel

The Ark of the Covenant played a major role in the history of Israel. When the Israelites came to the Promised land the Jordan river parted as the Ark of the Covenant led the way and they conquered the land that God had given them, all the way from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south. Later when their enemies the Philistines had captured the Ark they were plagued with the deadliest of diseases. Later in Israel’s history an Israelite was smitten dead for touching the Ark as it was tilting on a cart.
King David

David became king around 1000 BC and brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem with great praise and celebration. It was his greatest desire to build a Temple for the Ark, but this would be accomplished by his son Solomon.
When Solomon became king he was most respectful of the Ark of the Covenant and had it placed in the Holy of Holies within the First Temple in Jerusalem on Mt. Moriah, known as the Temple of Solomon.
After Solomon

When Solomon died the kingdom divided and there was a civil war, 10 of the tribes followed one king to the north, and the 2 remaining tribes followed the other king to the south and they called themselves Judah, and Jerusalem was the capital, and the Ark of the Covenant remained in the Temple in Jerusalem.
Israel's Rejection

The Bible goes on to say that throughout their history, the people of Israel forsook the LORD and refused to follow him. They chose to worship the gods of the nations around them, rather than seek the Presence of the true God. Their rejection continued until they finally lost their land, the beloved city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and Israel was carried away into captivity. After this the Ark of the Covenant was never seen again, even to this day.
The Second Temple

When some of the Jews returned from captivity they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, and it was referred to as the Second Temple, the Temple of Zerubbabel. There was no mention of the Ark of the Covenant. It would be around 400 years until the coming of Jesus, the one to whom was the true meaning behind the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat.
The Temple of Herod

During the time of Jesus, Herod the Great had rebuilt and beautified the Second Temple. The New Testament and ancient history make no mention of the Ark of the Covenant within the Temple of Herod in Jerusalem.
What happened to the Ark of the Covenant?

There have been many theories about the Ark of the Covenant but according to experts they are only speculation. To this day there has been no sightings, nor has there been any discovery. The Jews believe that the Ark was hidden on Mt. Nebo east of the Jordan. The Apocrypha gives a reason for this, stating that Jeremiah hid the Ark of the Covenant in a cave on Mt. Nebo before the Babylonians came and conquered Jerusalem. It also says that the location of the Ark of the Covenant would not be revealed until God's determined time (2 Maccabees 2:4-7).
The True Meaning

What was the true meaning and significance of the Ark of the Covenant? The Ark of the Covenant represented judgement and mercy, judgement if man approaches God and there is no blood to stay the judgement angels. Man would be face to face with the ten commandments which he cannot keep. Mercy if man approaches God with the blood of a substitute. When the high priest entered the holy of holies every year and sprinkled the blood upon the mercy seat and between the cherubim, God's judgement for sin fell upon an innocent substitute.
The Blood of Jesus

According to the Bible when God saw the blood he actually saw the blood of Jesus, and his blood would pay the debt once and for all mankind. For God to dwell within his people there must a willingness to approach God his way, by the way of grace in Jesus. The Israelites made their sacrifices into a ritual and they rejected Jesus Christ long before he ever came because Jesus was actually the word of God in the flesh, and it was always the word of God that the Jews rejected. One day Jesus will return and the Jews will mourn over this rejection and some will enter into glory. To the believer in Jesus today, the Ark of the Covenant represents God dwelling within the heart of anyone who loves him, and has received his free gift.
“They shall make an ark of acacia wood. Its length shall be two and a half cubits, its width a cubit and a half, and a cubit and a half its height. You shall overlay it with pure gold. You shall overlay it inside and outside, and you shall make a gold molding around it.”

—Exodus 25:10-11
Bible Verse

“You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold.”

-Exodus 25:17
“And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them.”

–Exodus 25:8