

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 345: Raiders of the Lost Ark

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The year is 1936. In Europe, the Nazis are on the march.

And in a sleepy college town in Bedford, Connecticut, a renowned archaeologist, just back from an eventful trip to Peru, receives a visit from two shadowy agents of US Army intelligence.

They've intercepted a mysterious message. Tannis development proceeding. Acquire headpiece. Staff of Ra.

And when the archaeologist hears those words, his eyes widen.

The Nazis have discovered Tannis, he says, one of the possible resting places of the Lost Ark, the Ark of the Covenant.

And so begins one of history's most thrilling archaeological field trips. And the name of that death-defying scholar, it is, of course, Tom Holland.

It's not Dominic. Although, Tom, you're a bit more of a Marcus Brody than an Indiana Jones, aren't you? I'm completely Marcus Brody.

You remember the bit in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, where Indiana Jones, he speaks 30 languages. He's at home with people across entire continents.

And he's stumbling down the railway station trying to bite him. His glasses steaming off.

But we should explain this, shouldn't we, for the people who haven't watched the Indiana Jones series.

So Steven Spielberg, series of films, Harrison Ford in a hat with a whip, going out and basically discovering stuff.

They're the only great films about archaeology. I think it's fair to say. And archaeologists absolutely love them.

Because they make archaeology seem much more interesting than it is. And they're conscious that their own careers are a crushing disappointment to the general public.

I mean, he does periodically say, you know, about whether it's the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail or whatever, that belongs in a museum.

So that presumably should keep them on board. Although, of course, the question of whether artifacts should be in museums is now a more controversial topic than it was.

Surely, Indiana Jones would be decolonized, wouldn't he? He would be held in very low regard by a lot of post-colonial archaeologists.

Well, so I mean, on the topic of should, for instance, the Ark of the Covenant, if it were to be found, it ends up.

I mean, should we give a spoiler on where it ends up? Maybe we shouldn't.

Anyway, the question of where the Ark of the Covenant should end up is a live issue throughout the film.

And maybe the question now is, you know, suppose the Ark of the Covenant were to be found, where should it go?

I mean, who would have dibs on it? Because the origins of the Ark of the Covenant, as we will be exploring today, because this is going to be the theme of today's episode, are very mysterious and contested.

They are indeed. But just before we go into the Ark of the Covenant, just a quick word about Raiders

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of the Lost Ark.

So the funny thing, we did a podcast, didn't we, about King Solomon's Mines, about the H Rider Haggard, kind of great classic of Victorian imperial fiction.

And there's a very, very obvious line of dissent, isn't there, from King Solomon's Mines?

Well, I think Spielberg would acknowledge that.

I think he absolutely would.

I mean, he was very influenced by the kind of adventures that were on when he was a boy, and they in turn were very overtly influenced by Rider Haggard.

Well, it's George Lucas who wrote the, who came up with the idea.

And it's exactly the same as with Star Wars, actually, that he, in the 1970s, the period of Watergate, which we've also done a podcast on, and the American retreat from Vietnam, which we've also done a podcast on,

Lucas and Spielberg, who are these sort of, you know, nerdy suburban young men, have this sort of deep nostalgia for the film serials that had watched as boys in the 1930s and 1940s, and they want to remake them.

Square, George, Clear Cut, Bullwhip, Carrying Heroes.

Exactly.

And the guy who wrote it, Lawrence Kasdan, he said he had fallen in love with cinema because he'd seen Lawrence of Arabia, which of course is another, you know, story of a sort of British imperial hero.

But the guy who suggested to him about the Ark of the Covenant was his friend, Philip Kaufman, who had studied history at Chicago.

But have you seen this detailed, extraordinary detail?

Philip Kaufman had first heard the story of the Ark of the Covenant from his dentist when he was 11. He was having some fillings.

I'm surprised about that, because Philip Kaufman was Jewish.

Yeah, but how many eight, nine, ten-year-olds are even listening when they're taken to the synagogue or the, or indeed church or the mosque or whatever?

They're probably half asleep.

Philip Kaufman, but when you're in the dentist's chair, Tom, there's no escape.

Then you're powerless.

You're powerless.

Yeah.

I disagree about that, because I think that actually, I mean, there's a great sequence in Red as the Lost Ark where Indiana Jones is explicating what the Ark of the Covenant is.

So the sinister agents, the American agents you've turned up who you talked about in your introduction, they're asking, you know, what is the Ark of the Covenant?

And Indiana Jones says, well, it's the chest that holds the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments?

Yes, the actual Ten Commandments, the original stone tablets that Moses brought down out of Mount Herob and smashed.

If you believe in that sort of thing, didn't you guys ever go to Sunday school?

Look, the Hebrews took the broken pieces and put them into the Ark.

When they settled in Canaan, they put the Ark in a place called the Temple of Solomon where it

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stayed for many years till all of a sudden whoosh, it was gone.

I mean, there's quite a lot of detail in that that is wrong, but the basic outline is right.

And I remember they have a brilliant illustration, kind of line drawing of the Ark on a hill surrounded by a blaze of light.

And it looks like a kind of weapon of mass destruction.

And that's the role that it is playing in Rades of the Lost Ark.

You know, we did an episode on Oppenheimer.

I mean, I don't want to go too seedy over this, but I think part of what the story is about is it's a kind of parable about the race for the atom bomb, isn't it?

I was about to say the race for the ultimate weapon.

Yeah, the idea that the Nazis are trying to get.

Well, we know that then, I mean, we did, we did a podcast about the rise of the Nazis.

There was always an element in Nazism that was fascinated by the occult and by weird esoteric theories.

It wasn't the sort of Himmler, you know, Atlantis or that business.

And what Rades of the Lost Ark and later on Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade capture is a combination of that, our fascination with that.

But also, as you say, the real life race between Nazi and American scientists to build the world's first atom bomb for the ultimate weapon that will win the war.

But of course, there is a slight tension there because, of course, it's fine for the Nazis to look for Atlantis and to cast the Atlanteans, for instance, as being Aryan.

But the whole point of the Ark of the Covenant is that it is very, very Jewish.

Yes.

And when, you know, there is a point where one of the Nazi officers says, I feel a bit uncomfortable about this.

It's all a bit Jewish for me.

Yeah.

But conversely, for the film to work, it has to be true.

I mean, the Ark of the Covenant really has to be what the Bible says it is, this kind of immense repository of power, this interface between God and man.

Because if it's not true, if it's not what the Bible claims it is, then its value as a weapon is nothing.

Yeah.

Fair enough.

Tom, I know you're going to talk with great enthusiasm.

I was about to say great length, which sounds forbidding, but actually it's better to say it will be so enthusiastic people won't notice how long it is.

But before you do that, I will say one last thing about Raiders of the Lost Ark, which is is underappreciated as a British film, because it was made at Elstree, as was Star Wars.

And it was shot.

I was read, I always find it really weird when you read these things about when films were actually made.

So it was shot in the summer of 1980.

So the headlines are full of West Ham when in the FA Cup.

Mrs. Thatcher's economic experiment going hideously wrong in the summer of 1980 and lots of

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people being out of work.

And meanwhile, these people trudging to the sound studios there to make this film about the Ark of the Covenant.

We're quite a 1935 there.

So I mean, there is quite a 1935.

Yeah.

Not wholly wrong.

Anyway, that's my last attempt to anchor us in the 1980s because I know you want to take us right back to prehistory and the biblical origins of the Ark of the Covenant.

Well, I mean, just to reiterate, the Ark of the Covenant has to, I mean, the reason that Calvin comes up with it is that they need a McGuffin, don't they?

They need something that Indiana Jones is going after.

But by making it the Ark of the Covenant, they amplify the stakes massively because the Ark of the Covenant is, it's the embodiment of the power of God on the face of Earth according to the Bible.

Yeah.

And so if you take that seriously, then you take the plot of the film seriously.

So most people probably, when they think of a biblical Ark, will think of Noah's Ark.

That's not the Ark that Indiana Jones is after because that would be far too big to hide.

Everybody at school, when I was at school, thought it was a film about Noah's Ark.

So, but they kind of share a similar derivation because an Ark basically is, it's a box or a chest and it's conventionally called the Ark of the Covenant.

But it has many names in the Bible because just to simplify things massively, the Bible is a patchwork of various narratives that have been stitched together to provide a kind of coherent narrative account of, right from beginning from creation of the world, the slavery of the chosen people in Egypt.

Moses leads them out of Egypt and he goes to Mount Sinai and he meets with God and God gives him various commandments that they have to follow.

Yeah.

And this is where the Ark of the Covenant comes in.

And the weird thing about it is that it is simultaneously the most important kind of object in the universe, perhaps, while also being really a very invisible presence in the Bible.

Considering how important it is, you'd expect it to be kind of popping up all over the place, but it doesn't.

It kind of comes in and out.

And I think that that reflects the fact that there are all these kind of various traditions, these various different accounts of what it is.

So basically, I think you can distinguish three separate traditions, explicating what the Ark is within the fabric of what Christians call the Old Testament, Jews call the Tanakh.

So in one tradition, it's the Ark that is made by Moses in obedience to instructions given by God and it's the place where God meets with man.

And therefore, it is terrifying because it is imbued with the power of God and to approach it is potentially lethal.

So the Ark bestows life, but it also bestows death.

So for example, if you were to open it and look on it, Tom, your face might melt.

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Exactly. Your eyes might kind of turn and drop out of your eye sockets and all that kind of thing. Yes, terrifying things.

There's then a much less exciting tradition, which would have made this lost Ark certainly a lot less dramatic,

which is that it's basically just a kind of box to keep the tablets of the law in.

So it's kind of a filing cabinet.

So it's basically like a box.

You've got a box where you keep your old coins.

It's a bit like that.

A little bit like that.

Yeah.

I mean, which an archaeologist, I think, would love.

Harrison Ford would have no interest in that at any time.

And then there's this sense of it, which again is really the one that you get in the Ark, the Raiders of the Lost Ark,

which is that it is a weapon of mass destruction.

It's the atom bomb.

It's something that destroys the enemies of the children of Israel.

So basically the Ark that we see in the Raiders of the Lost Ark is the Ark that we get in the book of Exodus,

which also includes the account of how the children of Israel leave Egypt, the plagues, crossing the Red Sea and all that kind of stuff.

So in Exodus, it is, we have very precise descriptions.

It's about four foot long.

It's two and a half feet tall, two and a half feet wide.

Yeah.

It's overlaid with gold.

You have kind of gold rings on all the four corners so that you can put poles through it and carry it that way.

And on the top, you have a great thick slab of gold, which is called the Mercy Seat.

And this slab of gold is topped by two cherubim who are kind of facing each other and there's kind of emptiness between the cherubim.

And the cherubim, I mean, people have heard of cherubs, you know, kind of rosy cheek little babies.

Yeah.

But in the Bible, they are not that at all.

They are very terrifying angels.

The angels basically who kind of directly attend God.

So they are, there are later descriptions of them in the Bible.

They're kind of winged, forehead, four-faced sphinxes.

So, I mean, alarming things.

Yeah.

And that gap between the two faces of the cherubim is where the presence of God is.

It's where in the Bible it's described as his heavy light, his glory, his kind of eminence.

And it contains the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments are written.

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And it's a very, very odd thing even by the standards of the Bible because God, of course, does appear to people in the Bible.

He appears to Adam walking in the Garden of Eden.

He appears to Moses in a bush.

He appears in a whirlwind to Job.

But it's only on this kind of the mercy seat of the ark, this space between the two cherubim on the top of the ark that he is kind of routinely manifest.

And this ark is exactly the ark that you see in Raids of the Lost Ark, right?

The gold slab, the cherubim.

I mean, it's pretty much identical to the...

I think it's a little bit bigger in the film, but...

That's always the way the Hollywood is, isn't it?

Yeah, of course. Of course.

Of course.

And this ark is built at the foot of Mount Sinai, where all the children of Israel have gathered and Moses has gone up onto Mount Sinai and he's spoken face to face with God.

He comes down with the tablets of stone.

He finds that the children of Israel have got so nervous that they fall into worshipping a golden calf.

Moses loses it, smashes the tablets as kind of chaos and disaster.

God is threatening to wipe the children of Israel out.

Moses goes back up to Mount Sinai, faces God, says, you know, please don't, please don't kill them all.

And God kind of calms down and hands over duplica of the original tablets of stone.

He's got a hell of a lot of tablets up there, Tom.

He's got a lot... Well, he's God. I mean, he can come up with what he likes.

So, meanwhile, down on the plane, the children of Israel have been given very precise instructions on how to build a tent that is called the tabernacle.

And it's kind of like Ikea cubed.

It's incredibly complicated.

The instructions are very, very precise.

So, you don't often think of Dutch theologians, perhaps, as being witty.

But there was one called Herman Vitzius in 1872, who amusingly said that God created the whole world in six days,

but he used 40 to instruct Moses about the tabernacle.

Everything about it has to be completely precise.

And the ark is kept in the tabernacle in a kind of backspace, which comes to be called the Holy of Holies.

Only Moses can go in there.

And this is because it is incredibly dangerous.

It's like going into the core of a nuclear reactor.

Basically, if you touch it, you'll be struck dead.

You have to follow these rules.

It's like very intense health and safety rules.

So, Moses' brother Aaron, he becomes...

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These are the ancestors of the priests who will tend to the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant.

But even two sons of Aaron, they make offerings to the ark and they get struck down.

And so, there's a sense which, of course, is absolutely manifest through outrides of the lost ark that the ark is so holy that if you approach it in the wrong way, it will kill you.

But also, even as you have all these very precise laws detailing how people are to approach it or not approach it,

there is also a sense that the ark has a will of its own.

So, in the account of the children of Israel leave the foothills of Sinai and start wandering in the desert.

And there's a sense that the Ark of the Covenant is kind of free-floating in front of them.

They have to follow where it leads.

So, even though you have these poles in it for carrying it,

there is also a sense that you don't actually need it because it will move at its own volition.

I was going to say demonic, which is the wrong word.

It's sort of divine power, isn't it?

And actually, just as you're talking about it having a will of its own,

George, it reminds me of actually another device who talked about in the rest of his history that sort of stood in for the nuclear bomb, Tolkien's ring.

So, Tolkien's ring has this incredible power but also has a will of its own and can move sometimes or fate can take it in funny directions.

Except that the ring is evil, whereas the ark absolutely isn't.

The ark is the manifestation of God on earth and that's what gives it its charge.

But, and I talked about these different traditions.

So, there's a further contradiction that you may have been wondering about, which is that if you, if people can't approach it,

then why are there rings to put poles in so that people can carry it?

Because, you know, there's an inherent contradiction there.

But this is not, the Bible is full of contradictions like this that aren't resolved.

And therefore, in a sense, I think, kind of compound the sense of mystery that surrounds it, makes it seem even more an awesome thing.

So, when the children of Israel arrive at the banks of the River Jordan and they've got to cross the Jordan to get into the promised land, Canaan.

They've been promised Canaan by God, which is full of great cities that have to be conquered.

Here, there's no kind of hiding the ark away inside the tabernacle.

You have people carrying it, they're not struck down.

The ark leads the children of Israel across the River Jordan

as the people who are carrying the ark step into the river, the waters run dry and they can cross the river, the whole army without their feet getting wet.

Famously, the first city that they confront is Jericho.

And the ark is taken seven times around the walls of Jericho.

Then the trumpets are blown and the walls of Jericho come tumbling down.

And this is, this is what the Nazis want the ark for, this kind of power, this ability to destroy cities.

So, everybody remembers the trumpets, well at least I remember the trumpets,

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but I've forgotten this stuff about the ark.

So, it's actually the ark.

The ark is the key thing.

The ark, not the trumpets, yeah.

The ark is the key thing.

It's no wonder the Nazis were after it.

The ark plays the key role basically in the ability of the children of Israel to conquer Canaan.

And the children of Israel establish themselves in Canaan.

They are then, they're kind of governed by people called judges.

Call them judges, give slightly the wrong sense.

You have a sense of people, you know, someone in a wig sending someone down for two years for uplifting or something.

Yeah.

That's not quite what, they're much more kind of impressive, intimidating figures.

But the weird thing is, is that throughout the book of judges, which describes this period, there is no account of the ark at all.

It's as though it's vanished.

My favorite book of the Bible, Tom.

The book of judges?

I did a project on it when I was about 12 because it's got a lot of battles.

Yeah.

And there's a bloke who's enormously fat, who gets stabbed with a dagger.

And the folds of fat envelop it right the way up to the hip.

That's right.

I remember that.

What I like about judges is there's less religion and more fighting.

And that's what I liked as an 11 year old.

Anyway, that's a massive, I shouldn't have taken you down that.

No, not at all.

But of course, I mean, you know what I'm going to say, there's no distinction between religion and fighting.

It's okay.

That church of England should absolutely hire you to bait that point to young people.

But of course, the paradigmatic enemies of the children of Israel, the people who are always remembered as their great enemies are the Philistines.

See peoples, maybe even perhaps Mycenaean Greeks, who settle in the lowlands in Gaza.

And the Israelites are up on the hills and there's kind of grumbling war between them.

And in the biblical accounts of these conflicts, the Ark makes a spectacular reappearance.

And having said that none of the judges really have anything to do with the Ark, in the account of the war with the Philistines, a judge appears who does have lots to do with the Ark.

And this is a guy called Eli.

And he has two sons with the tremendous names of Hophni and Phineas.

And they behave very badly.

They're not good people.

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And because of this, when they suggest taking the Ark into war against the Philistines, they are not worthy to be handling it.

They don't have the requisite degree of holiness.

So they take the Ark into battle against the Philistines.

And because God wants to make a point that Hoffney and Phineas are not up to the grade, the Israelites lose and the Ark is captured.

And this is obviously a tremendous debacle.

Yeah, that's a disaster.

And so the news is brought to Eli and he's so appalled that he drops down dead with the shock. Not surprised.

So Dominic, did you do, you didn't do a project on this?

No, I was a, there was a guy beginning with Jay, who's a famous judge, Jephthah, fighting the Ammonites.

So I was very big on Jephthah fighting the Ammonites and Gideon.

Well, my favorite people, biblical people were the Ammonites, because I imagined them as Mesozoic.

Walking fossils.

Yeah, with their tentacles sticking out, invading Canaan.

Anyway, let's get back to the Philistines who've captured the Ark.

And so what they do is they take it to the Temple of Dagon in a city called Ashdod.

And Dagon is this, he's a kind of corn god, massive, great statue.

And they put the Ark of the Covenant in front of the statue of Dagon.

And when they come in in the morning, they find that the statue of Dagon has teetered over and is prostrating itself before the Ark.

So they put it back up again, and the next day they come in.

And this time, not only has the statue of Dagon fallen over in worship before the Ark, but it's shattered into tiny pieces.

Power of the Ark.

Yeah, very bad news.

So they move it, they move it to another town.

Terrible things happen.

The Philistines get afflicted by mice, which I think is not the most terrifying of plagues.

That's a humongous detail.

And this is the thing that I always remember from reading about the Ark of the Covenant when I was a boy.

They get afflicted by tumors.

And I remember reading a book in which it was about the way that flying saucers had intervened in biblical history.

And this was offered as conclusive proof that the Ark of the Covenant was radioactive.

I was about to say this is radioactivity.

This is a nuclear bomb thing.

Well, I'm surprised they didn't bring it up actually in the space of the lost Ark.

Yeah, surely Graham Hancock is all over this town.

Well, we'll come to Graham Hancock in the second half.

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So basically all these tumors, all these mice, all these statues falling over left, right and centre, the Philistines decide that they don't want to keep the Ark.

So they hand it back and they give it to the children of Israel.

And it remains dangerous even for the children of Israel.

So there's this incredible verse.

The Lord smote the men of Beth Shemesh because they had looked into the Ark of the Lord.

Even he smote at the people 50,000 and three score and 10 men.

And the people lamented because the Lord had smitten many of the people with great slaughter.

So this sense that it is perilous.

This is now kind of part of the narrative again.

Yeah.

So basically the children of Israel have this incredible thing.

They're keeping it in a tent.

I think that there is a sense that maybe a tent isn't entirely where it should be kept.

So the judges get replaced by kings.

The most famous king, of course, is David.

David is told by God because for various kind of sins that he's done, that he is not the one who is going to build the temple.

But even so, David is the guy who has captured Jerusalem and makes it into his capital.

And the Ark is brought into Jerusalem.

And David is so excited by this that he dances in front of the Ark through the streets and his wife is furious about this, maybe because he was a very bad dancer.

I think she feels it's undignified.

Right.

Kind of like, you know, dad's a dancer at weddings.

Yeah.

But the guy who builds the temple famously is Solomon.

Yes.

And so the temple is modelled on the tabernacle but built in stone.

And so, again, you have the Holy of Holies.

And this is where the Ark of the Covenant is put.

And in the Bible it said it came to pass when the priests were come out of the holy place that the cloud filled the house of the Lord.

So that's what makes the temple so awe-inspiring is that God in some way is present within this house.

Yeah.

And it's built on Zion, the mountain of God.

And it's this that gives to Jerusalem, dare I say, its sacral quality.

And then you have, after the reign of Solomon, you have biblical accounts of all these kind of various kings.

The kingdom of Israel splits into two.

So you have the kingdom of Israel in the north.

You have the kingdom of Judah in the south.

And the last king really who is described as having anything to do with it is a guy called Hezekiah.

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And he is the king of Judah at the time when the northern kingdom of Israel is destroyed by the Assyrians
who are this great and terrifying empire based in northern Mesopotamia.
So they come and they destroy Israel and then they come and lay siege to Jerusalem.
And that siege is defeated.
I mean, kind of interestingly because a plague of mice come and gnaw away at the bow strings of the arrows of the Assyrians.
What is it with mice and the Ark of the Covenant, Tom?
Mice and the Ark have some kind of strange relationship.
Rats I could get.
But of course the rats don't appear in Indiana Jones, do they?
That's in the last crusade.
It's snakes.
So they could at least use snakes would be much more true to the Spielberg vision, wouldn't they?
Actually, I'm approaching this the wrong way around.
You are.
Anyway, so listen, so let's just get to the end of the biblical account.
So Hezekiah is the last figure in the Bible who is described as having seen the Ark.
And then I read what Indy said, Indiana Jones said.
It stayed in the Temple of Solomon for many years till all of a sudden whoosh, it was gone.
So that whoosh, it was gone.
There isn't a whoosh in the Bible.
It just vanishes.
Was it not captured by the Babylonians because they captured Jerusalem?
Surely they took it back to Babylon.
No, well, as far as we can tell, no, because there's actually in the Second Book of Kings,
you get this great inventory of all the loot that is taken from the Temple.
And the Ark of the Covenant is notable by its absence.
It's not there.
And when in due course that the Temple gets rebuilt because it's been destroyed by the Babylonians,
but the Babylonian exiles are allowed to come back by the Persians to rebuild it.
The rabbis are, looking back at this period, are confident that the Ark was not in this Second
Temple.
And we can be pretty confident of this because famously when the Romans capture Jerusalem under
Pompey the Great,
Pompey goes into the Holy of Holies and reports that there is nothing there.
There is no Ark.
And his face doesn't melt, he's not haunted by mice and none of these things?
Well, everything goes terribly for him from that point on.
He's had a career of unexampled success.
And then his career starts to tank.
So, I mean, I agree.
It's not like having your face melt, is it?
Or beaten by mice or get tumors, but it is a kind of judgment.

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Anyway, so that account, which is, we only have the Bible as evidence for what the Ark of the Covenant was.

We have no other accounts of it.

That leaves two massive mysteries, which perhaps we could come to in the second half.

The first is, what was the Ark?

Where do these traditions come from?

Are they likely to be true?

And the second is, where did it go?

Where did it end up?

What happened to it?

Great and great mysteries.

And we will address them, Tom.

We will go to Donahue, Fedora's, pick up our ball whips and address them after the break.

See you then.

Welcome back to the Rest is History.

Indiana Jones is talking us through the Ark of the Covenant.

So, Indy, you ended last time by saying you would address two questions.

First, what is the Ark and where does it come from?

And secondly, where did it go?

So, let's do question one first.

Where does this idea of this sort of sacred box come from, do you think?

Well, basically it comes from the Bible.

I mean, as I said in the end of the first half, this is our only source for it.

And so, like so much in the Bible, it's kind of midway between history and myth,

between what becomes monotheism and a kind of the pagan world

from which that monotheism emerges between Israel and the cultures in which the Israelites lived.

And that generates all kinds of paradoxes and ambiguities.

And I think that the reason that the Ark is such a kind of powerful symbol within the Bible is that all those kind of paradoxes that surround the way in which the Bible came to be written are mapped onto the paradoxical nature of the Ark within the fabric of the text, if that makes sense.

It's the power of the Ark within the fabric of the narrative, the biblical narrative,

owes a lot to the paradoxes and ambiguities of how the Bible came to be written.

Right. Okay.

Now, here's the question.

I would guess as a complete outsider and novice on all this,

that there must have been other kind of cults, as it were, and other peoples in the Levant,

in this period who had boxes or, I don't know, thrones or sacred things,

and this is one of them.

So, the Egyptians, for instance, they definitely have kind of sacred chests.

And it's the Egyptians, of course, that the children of Israel define themselves against,

so they would never acknowledge that, but perhaps that's part of it.

We know that the Phoenicians, who are very important in helping Solomon build the temple,

according to the biblical account, that they had chests that they carried about in chariots,

so presumably they have a kind of holiness to them.

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So, there's a wonderful new book that came out, I think, a couple of years ago called *God, an Anatomy* by Francesca Stavrakopoulou, who's a professor of biblical studies at Exeter. And she is interested in the idea that the kind of the trace elements that you get within the biblical narratives

of God as a kind of human figure, so physical figure.

So, that idea of Moses going up Mount Sinai and looking in God's face, this is meant literally, she argues.

So, she argues that the Ark may originally have been a footstool.

Footstool.

It was kind of understood as being the receptacle on which God's feet rested.

So, I mean, that's very much a very contested perspective.

But it's possible as well that that idea derives from the Egyptian tradition of placing covenants, law codes at the feet of their gods.

So, you're absolutely right, that there are all these kind of various traditions bubbling around.

But the honest truth is that we don't know.

We don't know.

But certainly, the Ark of the Covenant lies at the heart of something that is absolutely crucial to both Jewish and Christian understandings of their relationship to God, which is this idea that the tablets of stone do form a covenant, a bond between the children of Israel and God.

And this, in the context of antiquity, is absolutely unique.

Gods in the ancient world serve as witnesses to covenants.

The idea that a people could have a covenant with a God is something wholly exceptional.

And so, I think that the holiness, the paradoxes, the ambiguities that hedge the Ark of the Covenant around

are reflective of the almost kind of blasphemous quality of that covenant.

The idea that humans and the divine can be joined in something like that is by the standards of the ancient Near East, very, very shocking.

When you say it's a covenant, I mean, a covenant is a two-way thing.

What is God promising to do?

What is his part of the bargain, as it were?

He's going to love them and look after them and protect them.

Periodically, if they break the covenant, then he will punish them.

But he always does it in a kind of spirit of love.

And it's the fact that it is written down, that it's a contract.

Yeah, it's a contract.

And so, it's this idea that an all-powerful God can bind himself contractually.

It's fundamental to the development of both Jewish and Christian theology.

Because, for instance, it means that it makes it much easier for Jewish and Christian traditions to fuse with the inheritance of Greek philosophy.

Because philosophy essentially is an attempt to fathom the laws that govern the universe in the way that laws govern a city.

So, there's this idea that you have in Plato, in Aristotle,

in the kind of philosophical traditions that pass into the Roman period.

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But it's possible to fathom the universe in terms of laws that govern it.

Yeah.

And this is something that Jewish philosophy provides as well.

So, you have this guy Philo, who's an Alexandrian philosopher in the 1st century AD.

So, around the same time as St. Paul.

And he's absolutely obsessed by the Ark of the Covenant

as a kind of symbol of the fusion of Greek and Jewish traditions.

This idea that the universe can be fathomed because God has laid down laws

and God himself will obey those laws.

And in the long run, this is enormously, enormously influential.

So, I think in that sense, the Ark does is a lot more than just a weird box that gets carried around in.

It's genuinely powerful.

I mean, it's ideologically powerful.

And the power does not reside in melting people's faces so much as giving us a sense of the sacredness of the contract.

Right?

And of the idea of a covenant as being something binding and something special.

Yes.

And it may be that the impact of that is heightened by the fact that the Ark itself vanishes.

So, in a way, the idea of the Ark has the interface between God and man

as a kind of physical expression of this idea that God has bound himself contractually.

This becomes something metaphysical rather than couched within an object.

And so, that then raises question of what happened to the Ark.

Exactly.

So, there are all kinds of theories about this.

And lots of these theories are actually very ancient.

So, one theory is that it got carted off by the Egyptians.

Right.

Specifically, a king who in the Bible is called Shishak, who was probably a pharaoh called Sheshonk.

Sheshonk the first, remember his name?

Right.

And that, of course, would make it possible that the Ark of the Covenant, that Raiders of the Lost Ark, is right.

A tannis near Cairo.

So, presumably, that's where that theory, you know, as you said, Philip Kaufman did history at Chicago.

So, maybe that's what he was drawing on for that.

Another is that it got removed and hidden by one of the kings of Judah before the Babylonians came to keep it safekeeping, that it's hidden somewhere in the Holy Land.

They forgot where they put it, basically.

So, somewhere, it's waiting for some archaeologists to dig it up.

Well, yes, either an archaeologist or it will be revealed at the end of days.

I mean, you can take your pick.

Specifically, the idea is that it's been hidden by an angel in a rock.

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So, that would make it a challenge.

That is a challenge.

An archaeologist, perhaps.

And there's a very controversial, certainly if you're Jewish, theory that was proposed by the Samaritans,

who the Jews hated and feeling was entirely mutual.

And they claim that it had been hidden on Mount Gerizim, which is within the Holy Land, but is a mountain that's sacred to the Samaritans.

So, those are kind of the various theories.

However, what is the impact of the absence of the Ark of the Covenant on the way that Jews and Christians come to understand their own covenant with God?

So, Jews do not forget the Ark of the Covenant.

And we know this going into the Roman period,

because there's a frontier town called Dura Eropos,

which is kind of almost literally on the border between what's now Syria and Iraq.

And that was the border between the Roman and the Persian empires, right?

Yes.

And so, it gets destroyed by the Persians in 256 AD,

and kind of soil and rubble falls on top of it.

So, almost perfectly preserved.

And there's this incredible synagogue that's been found there

that is decorated with stunning biblical scenes,

in a completely unique way,

because famously, synagogues don't tend to be illustrated with biblical scenes.

But this does, and it shows the Ark being carried away from the Temple of Dagon,

and you've got all the kind of shattered fragments of the idol of Dagon around it.

But what's interesting about the way that the Ark is portrayed in this painting

is that it doesn't correspond to the description of the Ark that you get in the Bible,

but rather to the image of the Ark that you get in synagogues.

And in this Ark, you get the sacred scrolls, the Torah scrolls,

the scrolls that embody the first five books of the Bible.

And I think that you get a sense there that what the rabbis come to call the Shekinah, which is the presence of God in a place.

And so, archetypically, it had been present on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

But now that the Ark of the Covenant has gone, and obviously, by the 3rd century AD,

the Temple has gone as well, it's been destroyed by the Romans,

that therefore the Shekinah, the presence of God,

is something that can be experienced by the Jewish people

without reference to something that is physical, be it an Ark or a physical building.

The rabbis say that the Shekinah is present whenever someone studies Torah,

whenever someone is reading these Scriptures,

and indeed, whenever ten people are gathered together in prayer.

So there's this sense that that joining of the divine with the mortal

is something that has been divorced from the kind of awesome specificity

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that the Ark represented and has become something that all Jewish people can participate in. And you actually have a kind of rather similar idea in Christianity where St. Paul preaches a new covenant, a second covenant, that Christ has ushered in. And that covenant is written on the heart of each individual believer, which means in turn that it's the individual Christian, or indeed the assembly of all Christians, the ecclesiastical church, that has become the Ark. And so it's kind of been abstracted, it's become a kind of symbol. So Tom, I will amaze nobody to hear that much as I love the idea that the Ark has become this fantastically interesting symbol, and actually keenest to hear where it's really been hidden, and has it been hidden by the Templars, or whatever it might be. So the rabbis, even as they are basically saying that the Shekinah can be manifest wherever ten people gather to pray, they do also have traditions that the Ark is in Rome, that it got captured by the Romans when they sacked Jerusalem, they took it to Rome, and that it was kept in the Lateran Palace, which was the palace of the pope before the Vatican, and that unfortunately this burnt down in the 14th century, and one tradition says that this is when the Ark was lost. But another tradition is that it's still in the Vatican to this day. Of course it is, this is the stuff. Definitely, all the Rosicrucians have got it, or somebody of that ilk, surely. But there are other theories you'll be happy to know, and I think your wife and her sister, Rachel, will be very excited to know that there's a tradition that links it to Ireland. They'll be delighted. Yeah. So where is this in Ireland? Paul Rouse, I hope, would be excited by this as well. Our Irish guests. All our Irish listeners. So you may remember in our episode on the coronation, we talked about how the stone of scone was originally the pillow, the rock on which Jacob rested his head. Yes, and I absolutely believe that, by the way. And how it was brought to Ireland by an Egyptian princess. Well, there are traditions that she also brought the Ark of the Covenant. She brought two things that are really difficult to transport. Well, no, the Ark of the Covenant is a lot easier, because you've got those rings and you can stick poles in it. But also it moves under the same steam, right? Exactly. So as you're carrying that stone of scone, you could... Yeah, you could. I mean, maybe you could put the stone of scone inside the Ark of the Covenant.

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I mean, I don't know.

I don't know.

The traditions are obviously not entirely waterproof.

And the theory is that it's taken...

It's brought back to the Hill of Tara,

where the High Kings of Ireland are proclaimed and buried there.

And at the end of the 19th century,

a group called the British Israelites become very, very excited about this.

And the British Israelites believe that people in Britain and Ireland

are descended from the lost tribes of Israel,

the ten tribes who were carried off into exile by the Assyrians

when they destroyed the Kingdom of Israel and vanished.

Are they Jewish, the British Israelites?

Well, not Jewish, because the Jews are from the Kingdom of Judah,

but they're to be seen as Israelite, which is why they're...

They're the children of...

Not the British Jews, they're the British Israelites.

Okay, fine.

They're all the children of Israel, yes.

Right, yeah.

And so between 1899 and 1902, they start digging it up.

So they arrive at the...

They start digging it up.

And Irish nationalists get terribly upset by this.

And so WB8 is a great poet, right?

Celestial protest to the times.

But his girlfriend...

Oh, well, not his girlfriend, but certainly the woman he's madly in love with,

Maud Gon.

Yeah.

And is accompanied by Arthur Griffith, the leader of Sinn Féin.

Yeah.

You remember the monarchist leader of Sinn Féin?

Yeah, I do indeed.

I don't expect a combination of...

Austro-Hungarian enthusiast.

Yes.

So they go to Tara and this great bonfire has been built there,

prepared for the coronation of Edward VII.

They're going to light it in celebration.

And Maud Gon and Arthur Griffith get there and they light the bonfire early

and dance around it, singing nationalist songs

and proclaiming their opposition to the British-Israelite excavations.

And so the excavations get stopped.

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That is a bizarre story, isn't it?

That's so strange.

It's absolutely brilliant.

And a scene that we omitted from our account of Irish relations.

Tom, I have to say, it doesn't surprise me that...

Paul Rouse was telling us, indeed, there were books in Ireland claiming that chess is Irish.

So it doesn't surprise me that the Ark of the Covenant is also Irish.

Well, so it may still be there.

Yeah.

But also, I've got your notes in front of me, so I know what's coming.

I love this stuff about Ethiopia.

Right.

So Ethiopia is the best, the most extraordinary, the most credible, and certainly the most ancient of these traditions that say that the Ark got carried away from Jerusalem, carried away from the Holy Land and is kept in a wholly different location.

And the tradition is vested in this ancient text called the Kebra Nagast, the glory of the kings.

And the story that it tells patently derives from biblical accounts but gives it a kind of interesting spin.

It's a kind of spin-off from the franchise.

So Solomon builds a temple, puts the Ark of the Covenant inside the Holy of Holies at the heart of the temple.

He is famously visited by the Queen of Sheba.

And according to the Ethiopians, Sheba was Ethiopia.

Yeah.

And the Queen of Sheba was called Makeda.

This is very age-rider haggard, Tom.

And Queen Makeda, it's very, very age-rider haggard.

And age-rider haggard absolutely is aware of these traditions and is drawing on them.

Victorian venture writers are obsessed by these stories.

So according to the Kebra Nagast, the Queen of Sheba, Makeda, travels to Jerusalem she visits Solomon and she's converted to the worship of the God of Israel.

She is due to go.

Solomon, who is basically a massive ledge.

And this is, we have biblical evidence for this.

He tricks her into sleeping with him on the night before her departure and gives her a ring to give to her son

so that he will be able to recognize his heir.

And it's a bit like the legend of Theseus and Aegeus.

You remember that Aegeus leaves signs for Theseus so that Theseus can then come and find him.

It's a similar kind of goings on with this.

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So the son of Solomon and Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, he's called Manelik.
And he's born in Ethiopia.
He reaches manhood and he goes to Jerusalem carrying the ring that Solomon has given him.
Solomon recognizes him and Solomon gives Manelik his blessing.
Manelik then goes home and he is, you know, he goes off in great honor.
The firstborn sons of the elders of Israel accompany him as his escort.
But unknown to Manelik, his Ethiopian followers have removed the Ark of the Covenant from the temple.
And the moment this happens in Jerusalem,
dogs start howling, asses start braying, people start bursting into tears
even though they don't know why they're weeping.
And Solomon, who is famous as the wisest man in the world,
he twigs that something wrong has happened.
You know, the evidence is stacking up all these brain donkeys and so on.
And so he goes to the Holy of Holies.
He realizes the Ark has gone, understands that Manelik has probably taken it,
tries to stop Manelik.
But at this point, the Archangel Michael intervenes
and he scoops up the Ark, Manelik and his entire company
and he takes them to Ethiopia via Egypt
before Solomon can even leave the Holy Land.
And Solomon is so upset by this that he basically goes mad and starts worshiping idols.
And, you know, this is very bad form.
Meanwhile, Manelik has arrived in a mysterious city called Debra Makeda
and here he becomes king in his succession to his mother.
And because he has the Ark, he is able to defeat all his enemies.
So that's the weapon of mass destruction again.
This is the weapon of mass destruction again.
And a prophecy is given that in due course,
he will defeat the power of the King of the Romans,
conquer Constantinople and subdue the Jews.
Okay. That's still running.
Is it that prophecy? Because that hasn't happened yet.
Right. And something else that hasn't happened is that Christ hasn't returned.
And only when Christ returns will the Ark leave Ethiopia
and go back to Zion, to Jerusalem.
So that's the story.
And it is viewed by Ethiopians as their great national epic.
The idea that the Ark is in Ethiopia is taken incredibly seriously
by a great line of emperors, the last of whom, Halle Selassie,
was deposed in 1974, lived in Bath briefly.
So that's kind of a fun link of the Ark covenant to you.
It's a nice southwest English link to you, Tom.
And there's a church in Ethiopia, a place called Aksum,

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which actually claims to house the Ark,
even though the church itself has been destroyed
and rebuilt several times.

And the line of Halle Selassie, going back,
all these emperors have been crowned there.

And every year you have a great celebration in Aksum
to mark the coming of the Ark to Ethiopia.

But you may be wondering, where did this epic come from?

And it's incredibly mysterious.

So there's a lot of debate about when it was written.

And the most popular theory is that it's written early in the 14th century
when the dynasty that will culminate with Halle Selassie comes to power.

And it's called the Solomonic dynasty because they claim legitimacy
from their descent from Solomon.

And the idea is that this epic is written to give legitimacy
basically to a kind of dynasty of usurpers.

And that reference to Constantinople is a bit of a dead giveaway, isn't it?

To overthrow the power of Constantinople suggests it must be medieval.

Yeah, except not early 14th century because by the early 14th century
Constantinople is a shadow of its former self.

And also there are no kingdoms of the Jews,
whereas there is a kingdom of the Jews across the Red Sea
from Ethiopia in Southern Arabia in the 6th century.

And this is also when Constantinople, the Age of Justinian,
in its heyday.

So the other theory is that actually parts of it do come from the 6th century,
which means that it's incredibly ancient.

And one of the other factors that suggests that there's an elementary truth
in that is that there's no mention of Islam.

Right.

So, you know, Ethiopia is a Christian kingdom surrounded by Muslim powers.

You would think if it had been written in the 14th century,
there would be some allusion to that in the prophecies, but there isn't any.

So it's a kind of open question.

But the issues around when this epic was written,

I suppose the buried core, the thing that people would be most interested in
is, well, does it preserve an authentic tradition

that the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Ethiopia?

And is there, Tom, a top, a renowned, dare I say, archaeologist, historian,
and an expert uncovering the mysteries of the universe
with maybe a family member who works at Netflix,

who has strong theories about this?

Is there such a person?

Dominic, there is.

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So this is a very much friend of the show, I think, Graham Hancock.
I can't believe you'd describe Graham Hancock as a friend of the show,
but there you go.

Well, he is.

I mean, without him, we would...

He's a character.

...the character on Atlantis would not have been nearly as interesting.

So he was the East Africa correspondent for The Economist.

So he knew Ethiopia very well.

In 1992, he wrote a book called The Sign in the Seal,

The Quest for the Lost Ark of the Covenant.

And this was his kind of pivot moment from being a journalist
who wrote worthy articles and books on economics and famine in East Africa
to writing mad stuff about pyramids and Atlantis.

And he proposed that actually the Ark of the Covenant is in Ethiopia.

And he says that it was removed from the temple by Jewish priests
at a time when the priests felt that the kings of Judah weren't to be trusted.

That it was removed to a Jewish cult center in Egypt in the 5th century BC.

That it was then removed from this cult center in Egypt by Christian priests
and taken to Aksum in the 5th century AD.

There's a hell of a lot of under-reported removals taking place in this.

Right, but there's more.

So you mentioned the Knights Templar.

Yeah.

Graham Hancock's theory is that the Knights Templar was searching for the Ark of the Covenant
and that the Ark and the Holy Grail,

which we will be coming to in our next episode.

Next episode, yeah.

That's another Indiana Jones adventure,
that they are basically one and the same.

But if they are, then we can just run this episode again, Tom.

We don't need to do the extra recording.

But the papacy is very, very nervous that the Knights Templar
might get hold of the Ark of the Covenant and unleash its awesome power.

Yeah.

So this is why they destroy the Templars in the early 14th century.

Tom, I'm shocked that you waited until the end of the episode
to bring in this tremendous story, which is almost certainly true.

So the papacy...

Of course it's true.

Well, and so it's great fun.

And I remember reading it and being completely convinced when I read it.

I mean, it's all tremendous stuff.

And you might think that it's all just harmless fun,

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except for the fact that for the priests in Axum, who don't really speak English, you know, don't have the internet, don't really know what's going on in the world of conspiracy theories and Netflix documentaries, are suddenly completely bewildered by the massive international upsurge of interest in the Ark of the Covenant and what may be kept within the secret depths of the church in Axum. A treasure hunter is now descending on Axum to kind of try and see if they've got the Ark of the Covenant.

Is that what's happening?

Yeah.

So there's a very good book on the Ark of the Covenant called, surprisingly, The Ark of the Covenant.

Right.

By two scholars called Roderick Greerson and Stuart Monroe, hey, and they write about it.

The clergy who would have spoken openly about the great relic in Axum are now nervous of doing so.

And those who will speak to old friends are often anxious that their names remain private.

When Graham Hancock wrote his book, he had not intended to disrupt the lives of the Axumite clergy, but this has undoubtedly been the result.

The great success of the book in addressing a readership who would otherwise know very little about Ethiopia and whose interest in the relic at Axum was part of a general curiosity about the lost wisdom of antiquity has produced a kind of crisis.

Oh, that's a shame.

So that was written before the collapse of Ethiopia back into civil war. And so, as ever, there's a kind of anxiety about what might be going on in Axum in Ethiopia generally.

And so if indeed the Ark of the Covenant is there, maybe it's in danger again.

Maybe it needs an Indiana Jones to help the priests of Axum out.

I mean, definitely not to remove it.

Now, Tom, it would be remiss of me at the end of this.

As with your brilliant detective work on Hadrian and Antinous, you have to pick one about what you think happened to the Ark of the Covenant.

Which one are you going to go for?

I'm not even convinced the Ark of the Covenant existed.

I mean, I think you can kind of, you can back project this idea that is so important in the Old Testament as we have it.

This idea of a covenant between God and man.

This idea that it's physically embodied in tablets of stone where would these tablets of stone be kept?

And you can see how you might end up constructing a narrative

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that is drawing on various kind of Near Eastern traditions.
And so maybe it's entirely fictional.
If it's not fictional, I imagine that it just gets destroyed at some point.
Maybe by the Babylonians.
I mean, who knows?
I can tell you where it is.
It's in a warehouse in America emitting a strange hum
where it was put by members of the US Army Intelligence Unit in 1936.
Dominic, I thought we said no spoilers.
Well, that's not really much of a spoiler.
Right, Tom, that was wonderful.
That was a veritable tour de force.
Now, we will be back on Thursday with the second half of Indiana Jones double bill
and this time we'll be exploring the mystery of the Holy Grail.
But of course, if you're a member of the Rest is History Club,
you can listen to that right now.
If you're not, sadly you won't,
but you could join up at restishistorypod.com.
Tom, are you as excited about the Holy Grail
as you were for the Ark of the Covenant?
I'm even more excited.
I was obsessed by the Holy Grail when I was...
That is exactly the answer I was looking for.
So, listen now if you're a member of the Rest is History Club
and if you're not, we will see you on Thursday.
Goodbye.
Bye-bye.
Thanks for listening to the Rest is History.
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