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# Jeremiah in History and Tradition

Edited by Jim West and  
Niels Peter Lemche



## 4 Jeremiah and the ark<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Römer

### The ark in the Hebrew Bible – an overview

In The Torah, the ark is mentioned for the first time<sup>2</sup> in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 25–31 and 35–40), in relation to the construction of the mobile sanctuary. We then find it in Lev 16:2 and six times in the Book of Numbers: three times it is mentioned as part of the mobile sanctuary, and three times as a guide for the people during the desert wandering (Num 10:33 and 35) and in war (Num 14:44). In the Book of Deuteronomy, the ark is mentioned in chapters 10 and 31. Deuteronomy 10 reads like an alternative narrative of the ark's construction to that of Exodus 25–40. The texts in Deuteronomy emphasize the idea that the ark contained the two tablets of the Law.

The ark appears in all the books of the Former Prophets. In the conquest accounts of the Book of Joshua, it plays a prominent role in the story of the crossing of the Jordan, where it is carried by the priests (Joshua 3–4). It is further mentioned in the narrative about the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6), and also once in Josh 7:6. It does not appear, however, in the other conquest narratives. In the Book of Joshua, the last mention of the ark occurs in 8:33, in a ceremony of blessing and cursing. Here it is related to the Levites, as is also the case in Deuteronomy. The Book of Judges contains only a short note about the ark, according to which it was located at Bethel in the time of the Judges (Judg 20:27).

In the Books of Samuel, however, the ark is found in the sanctuary of Shiloh. 1 Sam 4:1–7:1 contains a long story commonly referred to as the 'ark narrative'. This narrative recounts how the Philistines captured the ark and placed it in the sanctuary of their god Dagan. However, the power of the ark was so strong that the Philistines gave it back. Once back in Israel, the ark did not return to Shiloh but remained in Kiriath Jearim for 20 years (1 Sam 7:2). It is then briefly mentioned in the story of the battle of Saul and Jonathan against the Philistines in 1 Sam 14:18<sup>3</sup> (where the ark seems to be located in Gibeon of Benjamin). 2 Samuel 6, often considered to be the conclusion of the ark narrative, depicts David's transfer of the ark to Jerusalem. The ark later appears in 2 Samuel 7 where David wants to build a house for YHWH and the ark dwelling under a tent (vv. 1–2). In 2 Sam 11:1 Uriah mentions the ark as placed in a hut (*sukkā*) in the context of a war against the Ammonites. In 2 Samuel 15 the priest Zadok appears with the Levites as having the charge of carrying the ark (vv. 24–29).

In Kings, the ark is mentioned in the story of Solomon's rise and in the construction of the temple (1 Kings 2–8). Once the temple is completed, Solomon introduces the ark into the Holy of Holies. Then, astonishingly, the ark disappears from the Book of Kings<sup>4</sup> and no further information is provided about it and its fate during the fall of Jerusalem.

In the Latter Prophets, the ark only appears in the Book of Jeremiah in an oracle which demands that the audience cease to commemorate the lost ark or to construct a new one (Jer 3:16).

In the Writings, the authors of Chronicles seem particularly interested in the 'ark of the covenant of Yhwh'; they even add new passages about the ark which do not figure in the Books of Samuel and Kings. Outside Chronicles, there is however only one mention of the Ark:<sup>5</sup> namely, in Ps 132:8, which mentions the ark in the context of a saying that possibly alludes to its entry into Jerusalem.

This 'synchronic' overview shows an interesting fact: on a 'chronological' level the narratives in Exodus – Kings and Chronicles (as well as Ps 132) – cover a period from the construction of the ark under Moses in the wilderness until its placement in the Jerusalem temple under Solomon.<sup>6</sup> Nothing is said about the ark during the time of the Judean monarchy. It simply vanishes.

In this respect Jer 3:14–18 is of major interest. This is the only text in the Hebrew Bible where a prophet speaks about the ark and claims that the ark of Yhwh shall not be rebuilt anymore. This oracle apparently presupposes that the ark had been lost in one way or another.

What is the function of this oracle, and why is Jeremiah the only prophet who is credited with an oracle about the ark, and how are we to understand the prohibition to build a new ark?

### Jer 3:14–18 in its context

Jer 3:14–18 is located in Jer 2:1–4:4, a collection of prophetic oracles. Many scholars claim that parts of these oracles were originally addressed (by the 'historical' Jeremiah) to the population of the former kingdom of Israel, and were, later, during the Babylonian or Persian period, revised and transformed into oracles that explain the fall of Judah and the Babylonian exile.<sup>7</sup>

According to 3:12, the following oracles are meant to be addressed to the 'North' (צפון), and since 3:14 do not contain any new introduction; the sayings in 3:14–18, according to the redactors of the book, should have the same addressees. The unit 3:14–18 can be translated as follows:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Return, sons that turned away, oracle of Yhwh, for I am your baal; I will take you, one from a city and two from a clan, and I will bring you to Zion.

<sup>15</sup> I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will shepherd you with knowledge and understanding.

<sup>16</sup> And it will happen that you multiply and increase in the land, in those days, oracle of Yhwh, one will not say any more, 'The ark of the covenant of Yhwh.' It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed. It will not be made again.



<sup>17</sup> At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of Yhwh, and all nations shall gather to it – to Yhwh's name to Jerusalem<sup>9</sup> – and they shall no follow the stubbornness of their evil mind.

<sup>18</sup> In those days the house of Judah shall walk alongside the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north (צפון) to the land that I gave your fathers<sup>10</sup> for a heritage.

There is an ongoing debate whether this passage is Jeremianic, Deuteronomistic, or post-dtr.<sup>11</sup> The language of the passage presupposes dtr terminology but also the priestly expression 'to multiply and to increase' (רבה and פרה v. 16).<sup>12</sup> In its present form, the oracle is conceived to fit between Jer 3:13 and 3:19 because it takes up numerous expressions and themes from the foregoing and following passages (Rudolph 1947: 27; Römer 1990: 472).

There are several indications that the passage is composite and was possibly composed in several steps. The original unit consisted of vv. 14–15, and could have been very well followed originally by verses 19ff in which the key words of vv. 14–15 are taken up again (Craigie et al. 1991: 59).

The saying about the ark in vv. 16–17<sup>13</sup> and the promise of the unification of Israel and Judah in v. 18 may have been added in several steps. The question then is whether all of these additions are *Fortschreibungen* of later redactors or whether some of these oracles preserve memories of Jeremianic oracles.

Contrary to the other oracles in vv. 14–18, the saying about the ark has no clear links with the immediate literary context. Does this oracle (vv. 16–17\*<sup>14</sup>) conserve a memory of a saying of the prophet Jeremiah, as argued by Weinfeld, Cazelles, and others?<sup>15</sup> But would such a statement about the ark really fit the time of Jeremiah? In order to respond to this question we need to turn to the historical question of when the ark arrived in Jerusalem.

### The transfer of the ark to Jerusalem

According to the biblical narrative, it was David who brought the ark to Jerusalem, and Solomon, who introduced it into the temple. Curiously, however, once the ark is placed in the Holy of Holies, the Books of Kings never mentions it again. This observation needs some explanation. The transfer of the ark to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6 was considered by Rost as the conclusion of the so-called ark narrative, which according to him was based on historical events (Rost 1926). Rost's theory has however been challenged in several ways. First of all the idea that 2 Samuel 6 should be the original ending of the ark narrative was questioned quite early. Several scholars<sup>16</sup> have highlighted the differences between the ark narrative in 1 Sam 4:1–7:1\* and the transfer story in 2 Samuel 6. The most important arguments are the following: (1) if 2 Samuel 6 was the direct follow up of 1 Sam 7:1, David would appear without any introduction. (2) The names differ: 1 Samuel 7 mentions Eleazar as Abinadab's son; 2 Samuel 6 speaks about Uzza and Ahio. (3) In 1 Samuel 4–6 the ark is identified with Yhwh and acting directly; in 2 Samuel 6 the ark is more a cultic symbol. (4) The style and the vocabulary of 1 Samuel

4–6 on the one hand and 2 Samuel 6 on the other are quite different. Both units only share four of the 54 words and expressions that Rost considered to be typical for the so-called ark narrative (Schäfer-Lichtenberger 1995: 328). That means that the original ark narrative ended with the establishment of a new shrine for the ark in Kiriath Jearim. The original story would then be a *hieron logos* of Kiriath Jearim, the new shrine of the ark. Recent excavations conducted by the university of Tel Aviv and the Collège de France at Deir El-Azar (the modern name of Kiriath Jearim)<sup>17</sup> have made it plausible that there was an artificial podium on the top of the hill that was probably constructed in the first half of the eighth century BCE and may have hosted a sanctuary on a location where a Byzantine church had been built later, the mosaics of which are still visible in the modern basilica.<sup>18</sup> Considering this date and the fact that similar monumental platforms are known in the Northern Kingdom (Finkelstein 2013: 85–105) but do not exist in Judah, and given the Northern reality behind the original ark narrative, Israel Finkelstein and I have recently suggested that the monumental platform at Kiriath Jearim could have been built in the days of Jeroboam II. At this time Kiriath Jearim was, similar to Bethel, a 'border sanctuary' located in the territory of Benjamin and under control of Jeroboam.<sup>19</sup> In this case 2 Samuel 6 should not be considered as preserving a historical memory about the transfer of the ark from Kiriath Jearim to Jerusalem, but as a composition from the time of Josiah.

### A prophet from Kiriath Jearim (Jer 26:20–23)

If the transfer of the ark to Jerusalem and the closing of the sanctuary of Kiriath Jearim happened only in the last decades of the kingdom of Judah, one could easily understand the fact that in Jer 26:20–23 a prophet from Kiriath Jearim, named Uriah, appears in Jerusalem and is presented as a colleague of Jeremiah:

There was another man prophesying in the name of Yhwh, Uriah son of She-maiah from Kiriath Jearim. He prophesied against this city and<sup>20</sup> against this land according all the words of Jeremiah of Jeremiah.

(Jer 26:20)

The name Uriah is quite popular in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE<sup>21</sup> and there is no reason to doubt that such a prophet really existed. The additional characterization through the name of his father indicates that the author of the passage wished to distinguish this prophet from other people (prophets?) bearing the same name.

The information about a prophet from Kiriath Jearim acting in Jerusalem makes sense if the sanctuary of this place had been closed not such a long time before. There is no agreement about the date of the passage Jer 26:20–23.<sup>22</sup> The account of this prophet killed by the Judahite king may prepare readers for the post-dtr idea of the violent death of Yhwh's servants, the prophets,<sup>23</sup> and may have been inserted into Jeremiah 26 at a later editorial stage (Gerald L. Keown et al. 1995: 29–30; McKane 1996: 675), preserving, however, some historical memories about a prophet from the ancient sanctuary of the ark.<sup>24</sup>



The statement that Uriah is speaking like Jeremiah refers in the context of Jeremiah 26 to Jeremiah's announcement of the destruction of Jerusalem, which he compares in Jeremiah 7 and 26 to the destruction of Shiloh. This comparison of the fate of Jerusalem with the fate of Shiloh is clearly a hint of the ark tradition, since according to 1 Samuel 4 Shiloh was the first sanctuary of the ark.<sup>25</sup>

### From Shiloh to Jerusalem

According to Jeremiah 7, Shiloh was the place where Yhwh made his name dwell first. The destruction of Jerusalem compares, according to Jer 7:12–14, to Yhwh's abandonment of Shiloh:

<sup>12</sup> Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell in the beginning, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.  
<sup>13</sup> And now, because you have done all these things, oracle of Yhwh, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, <sup>14</sup> therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your fathers, just what I did to Shiloh.

Jer 7:1–15 stems from a Deuteronomistic redactor of the Book of Jeremiah, but might keep the memory of an older Jeremianic announcement of the destruction of the temple.<sup>26</sup> One may indeed ask whether the Deuteronomists would have invented a comparison of the fate of the sanctuary of Shiloh and the temple of Jerusalem, or whether such a comparison stems from the original temple speech. In any case the Deuteronomists of the books of Jeremiah, but also those who edited the Books of Samuel and Kings, accepted the idea that Yhwh, before the temple of Jerusalem, chose the Northern shrine of Shiloh as his dwelling place. This succession of Shiloh and Jerusalem can be explained by the presence of the ark in both sanctuaries.

The archeological situation of Shiloh is somewhat unclear. A sanctuary has not been discovered yet. According to Finkelstein's excavation the site was abandoned or destroyed (by the Philistines?) in the middle of the 11th century BCE and then sparsely repopulated during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE (Finkelstein 1992: 1069–72; cf. also Finkelstein and Brandl 1993). The current excavations, the results of which are not yet published, seem to expose an increasing activity on the site during the Assyrian period.<sup>27</sup> In any case the mention of Shiloh in the context of Jeremiah 7 and 26, and also Psalm 78:59–60, makes better sense if something happened there during the eighth or seventh centuries BCE.<sup>28</sup> Jer 7:12 indicates that in the time of Jeremiah (or somewhat later) one could still visit the ruins of Shiloh, and Jer 41:5 mentions men from Shechem, Shiloh,<sup>29</sup> and Samaria on their way to bring vegetal offerings to the (destroyed) temple of Yhwh in Jerusalem.<sup>30</sup>

It is probably because of the mentions of Shiloh in Jeremiah 7 and 26 that the saying about the ark in Jer 3:16–17 was integrated into the Book of Jeremiah.

### Jer 3:16–17: The ark shall not be rebuilt

Neither 2 Kings nor 2 Chronicles provide any information about what happened to the ark after the destruction of the Jerusalemite temple. For that reason some scholars have argued that the ark had been destroyed by former kings such as Manasseh (Haran 1963: 46–58) or others.<sup>31</sup> The most plausible hypothesis however is that the ark disappeared during the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians. Since it does not figure among the objects of the temple that the Persians gave back to the Judeans (Ezra 1:7–11; 5:13–15) one should not imagine that the ark was taken as booty to Babylon<sup>32</sup> but that it was destroyed during the burning down of the temple (Enstrom and van Dyk 1997: 50–60; Day 2005: 267–70).

In its present form this saying (Jer 3:16–17) presupposes the early Persian period. It probably reflects a discussion about the reconstruction of the ark for the second temple. Apparently there existed an important group that was in favor of rebuilding the lost ark (Schäfer-Lichtenberger 2000: 235). This is especially the case of the 'priestly school',<sup>33</sup> which in Exodus 25–31 and 35–40 describes the tabernacle in the wilderness as foreshadowing the (second) Jerusalemite temple (Utzschneider 1988: 280–97). In the building instructions as well as in the construction account the ark plays an important role. In Exodus 25 the ark is covered by a kapporet (Nihan 2007: 44–50) that is protected by two cherubs. This may be understood as a priestly reinterpretation of the cherubs in the first temple who protected the throne of Yhwh. In any case, the idea to have the (new) ark associated with cherubs triggered an opposition to its rebuilding<sup>34</sup> as well as the souvenir that the first ark contained a representation of Yhwh (Römer forthcoming). Such iconic concepts were not compatible any longer with the rise of aniconism in the Persian period.

The refusal of the fabrication of the ark triggered the saying in Jer 3:17 according to which the city of Jerusalem shall become the throne of (the now invisible) Yhwh. The insertion of the oracle about the ark that shall not be rebuilt into the Book of Jeremiah can be explained by the allusions to the ark in the mention of Shiloh in Jer 7 and 26, as well as by the episode of the prophet Uriah from Kirriath Jearim in 26:20–23. In its present form 3:16–17 is to be dated to the time of the construction of the second temple.<sup>35</sup> One cannot exclude the possibility that the oracle is based on an older saying addressed to the inhabitants of the former Northern Kingdom.<sup>36</sup> In this case one could understand it as an exhortation not to mourn the disappearance of the ark from the North (Kirriath Jearim?) but to accept the fact that the ark is now in Jerusalem. However, the original wording of such an oracle cannot be reconstructed anymore,<sup>37</sup> so that we should primarily understand Jer 3:16–17 in the context of the reconstruction of the temple in the Persian period.

The idea of Jer 3:16–17 that the ark was definitively lost was however not unanimously accepted. 2 Maccabees 2 referring to a 'book of Jeremiah' (v. 1)<sup>38</sup> tells that Jeremiah hid the ark together with other vessels of the temple:

<sup>4</sup> It was also contained in the same writing, how the prophet, being warned by God, commanded that the tabernacle and the ark should accompany him, ill



he came forth to the mountain where Moses went up, and saw the inheritance of God.<sup>5</sup> And when Jeremiah came there he found a hollow cave: and he put in there the tabernacle, and the ark, and the altar of incense, and closed the door.<sup>6</sup> Then some of them that followed him, came up to mark the place: but they could not find it.<sup>7</sup> And when Jeremiah perceived it, he blamed them, saying: The place shall be unknown, till God gather together the congregation of the people, and receive them to mercy.<sup>8</sup> Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear, as they were shown in the case of Moses, and as Solomon asked that the place should be specially consecrated.

(2 Macc 2:4–8)

The fact that 2 Maccabees attributes the hiding of the ark to the prophet Jeremiah may be explained by the idea attested in rabbinic discussions that king Josiah hid the ark (B. Yoma 52b; cf. Weinfeld 1976: 23–4), or probably better as a relecture of Jer 3:16–17: there is indeed no need to rebuild the ark because the prophet Jeremiah himself has hidden it! The idea of the appearance of the ark at the end of time is taken up in Rev 11:19 and also in Islamic hadiths. Up to the present, speculations continue about the hidden place of the ark.<sup>39</sup> But that is another story.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Gary Knoppers, a good friend and an esteemed colleague who passed away all too soon on December 22, 2018.
- 2 Gen 50:26 mentions the term *'arōn* in order to designate the box in which the Israelites should transport Joseph's bones.
- 3 According to the MT; LXX has 'ephod'.
- 4 The mention of an *'arōn* in 2 Kgs 12:10–11 does not refer to the ark, but a chest for collecting money.
- 5 It has sometimes been argued that Ps 24:7–10 as well as 47:6, which speak about Yhwh's entering into Jerusalem or his elevation, also allude to his presence in the ark. Lam 2:1 (mentioning Yhwh's 'footstool') has also been considered as alluding to the ark (see Metzger 1985: 359). These are however extrapolations since there is no mention of the ark (see Maier 1965: 68, 77–80).
- 6 There is only one exception to which we will return in the following: in 2 Chr 35:3 (a verse that has no parallel in Kings) Josiah tells the Levites that they do not need to carry the ark any more.
- 7 For an overview see Albertz (1982: 20–47), Wanke (1995: 16–17).
- 8 The translation is based on NRSV with some personal modifications.
- 9 The expression in brackets, missing in LXX\*, is a gloss that wants to specify where the nations will gather.
- 10 LXX and other manuscripts have a third masc. pl. form, which is certainly a harmonization. Since v. 18 refers back to v. 14, the second person makes perfect sense; cf. Römer (1990: 471).
- 11 See also the overview in Soggin (1997: 215–21).
- 12 Therefore Thiel considers the passage as 'post-dtr' (Thiel 1973: 91–3). Cf. also Werner (1997: 66–8). For a postexilic date cf. also Wanke (1995: 52–4).
- 13 One may also speculate whether the verses 16 and 17 did belong together from the very beginning or whether the saying about the ark in v. 16 was originally an independent

unit. The sayings in v. 16 and v. 18 are introduced by the expression *וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה* whereas v. 17 is introduced by *וַיִּבְרַח*, which would indicate that v. 17 was added later to verse 16 as argued by Wanke (1995: 54–5) and Werner (1997: 67–8). For another opinion cf. Levin (1985: 190), who considers 3:16–17 to be the last *Fortischreibung* of the passage. If v. 16 is a Jeremianic oracle it would have started with 'in those days'. The foregoing sentence which reminds of priestly language would then be an addition, cf. Cazelles (1968: 147–58).

- 15 Cazelles (1968), Weinfeld (1976: 19–26), cf. also Weiser (1952: 30–1), Craigie et al. (1991: 59–60).
- 16 See already Wellhausen (1963: 238), Schicklberger (1973: 13–17), Miller and Roberts (1977: 18–26), Porzig (2009: 134–5, 161–2).
- 17 The modern name may keep the memory of Eleazar who according to 1 Sam 7:1 became the first priest of the sanctuary.
- 18 For more details cf. Finkelstein (Finkelstein et al. 2018: 31–83).
- 19 There is some hesitation in the lists of the Book of Joshua about whether Kiriath Jearim belongs to Benjamin or to Judah; for more details cf. Finkelstein et al. (2018: 35).
- 20 'Against this city' is missing in LXX. This may be due to haplography, cf. Janzen (1973: 119). For the opposite idea according to which the references to the 'city' should be considered a proto-Masoretic revision, cf. Stipp (1994: 103).
- 21 Cf. Lundbom (2004: 296). He also points out that this Uriah cannot be identified with 'the prophet' mentioned in a letter from Lachish. For other occurrences of the name in the late monarchic period cf. Hodossy-Takács (2015: 130) with footnote 11.
- 22 For a discussion of different options cf. McKane (1996: 671–6).
- 23 See on this topic Steck (1967).
- 24 Rudolph (1947: 146–7). Hodossy-Takács (2015: 132–3) dates Uriah's flight to Egypt and his capture there around 600 BCE.
- 25 Cf. already 1 Sam 3:3, a later insert that aimed at creating a link between Samuel and the ark.
- 26 The existence of dtr redactions in the Book of Jeremiah is nowadays very much disputed. All those who claim that the so-called dtr texts in Jeremiah are just imitations of dtr language still fail to explain the coherent dtr ideology that can be detected in most of those texts. In this regard I think that Thiel's insights are still valid. Cf. further arguments for a dtr redaction in Jeremiah and especially in chapters 7 and 26 in Römer (2016: 124–31).
- 27 Oral communication from Israel Finkelstein.
- 28 Pearce (1973: 105–8) advocates an Assyrian destruction of the sanctuary. One may speculate whether before or after this destruction Jeroboam II took the ark from Shiloh and brought it to Kiriath Jearim. But here we were almost in the realm of science fiction.
- 29 LXX has 'Salem' which cannot be right.
- 30 Bloodless sacrifices fit to the fact that the temple and the altar were destroyed; cf. Lundbom (2004: 117–18) and Fischer (2005: 385–6).
- 31 For an overview of different theories see Day (2005: 250–70).
- 32 This idea can be found in the rabbinic discussion; cf. Schäfer-Lichtenberger (2000: 229–41, 239–40).
- 33 To which one may add the authors of Chronicles, which, as pointed out above, mention the ark more frequently than the Books of Kings.
- 34 Schäfer-Lichtenberger, " 'Sie wird nicht wieder hergestellt werden' " (2000: 240–1).
- 35 Usually dated around 525–520 BCE. For another proposal see Edelmann (2005).
- 36 As argued especially by Cazelles (1968). See also Weiser (1952: 29–31).
- 37 One could follow Duhm (1901: 40), and translate v. 16 as an indirect discourse: "you shall not speak any more about the ark of Yhwh" (although Duhm attributed this passage to the postexilic time; see also Soggin [1997: 216–17]), but this does not help much.



- 38 This may be a reference to the *Epistula Ieremiae* or the *Apocalypse of Jeremiah*, cf. von Dobbeler (1997: 173).
- 39 See the article of Arnaud (2019: 36–8).

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