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WHAT WAS IN THE ARK ?

ACCORDING to 1 Kings, chapter eight, verse nine, "there was nothing in the ark save the two tables of stone, which Moses put there at Horeb." In the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter nine, verses three and four, the "tabernacle which is called the holiest of all" contained (literally, "had") "the ark of the covenant . . . wherein was the golden pot that had the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant".

On the face of the matter there is a contradiction between these two passages, one in the Old Testament and one in the New. What is to be said of the inevitability of this contradiction?

The reference in Hebrews to the pot of manna and the rod of Aaron does not, of course, stand alone. For in Exodus xvi. 34 we are told that Aaron "laid up" the pot of manna "before the Testimony" (i.e. the ark of the testimony), "to be kept". And in Numbers xvii. 10, 11, Moses is instructed to "bring Aaron's rod before the testimony, to be kept for a token"; and he is then declared to have done so.

Thus there are two questions that emerge, not just the one arising from the comparison of 1 Kings and Hebrews. First, there is the question, why is nothing said of the manna and the rod in 1 Kings, although according to Exodus and Numbers these were to be kept perpetually "before" even if not (as in Hebrews) "in" the ark? And second, how is it that Hebrews, which refers to what 1 Kings ignores, puts the two objects not "before" but "in" the ark?

A first step towards solving these difficulties is to recognize that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews clearly refers, not to the temple of Solomon, but to the tabernacle of Moses which preceded it by some centuries. For him therefore no thought of any difficulty arose from the silence of the Book of Kings about rod and pot. He was doubtless as familiar as any scholar to-day with the narrative of Kings: indeed, he seems to refer, in his eleventh chapter, to passages in this book.

He therefore knew that when Solomon instituted the worship in his newly finished temple he found nothing but the tables of the testimony in the ark of the testimony. It would have served no useful purpose for him to add a remark to this effect in his inventory of the Mosaic tabernacle.

Now the next step calls for a little historical imagination. That Mosaic tabernacle was designed for the nomadic state and therefore required adaptability and transportability. There were vicissitudes through which we know the sanctuary and its ministrants passed, and there were doubtless others of which we are told nothing. It is no unreasonable supposition that after some such experience a pious high-priest, scandalized by what he had been powerless under the circumstances to prevent, determined to place the golden pot of manna and the miraculously budded rod of Aaron, his predecessor, within the ark, instead of leaving them to be carried about, when a move was necessary, by the Levites whose duty it was to transport the sacred articles. We need not ask whether this decision was made with, or without, the approval of the Lord of the ark. Whether yes or no, it was done. Thenceforth it became the well understood fact in Israel that the ark housed, not only the tables of stone, but also the two symbols of the Lord's miraculous care of His people in the wilderness and of His choice of the Aaronic family as His priests, namely, the pot of manna and the rod of Aaron. For it is not the author of Hebrews alone who has preserved this ancient tradition; the same is mentioned by Jewish writers also.

What then had become of these symbols by Solomon's time? Why weren't they then in the ark? It is no more a stretch of the imagination to account for this than for the other problem. In fact, if our former supposition is correct, this second becomes not only possible but highly probable. When the ark was captured by the Philistines and passed for the space of seven months into their keeping, what would be the most likely objects to suffer loss by pilfering or by wanton destruction? Would it not be this pot, which Hebrews expressly tells us was made of gold—a fine bit of booty for some Philistine “lord” or priest!—and likewise this worthless, withered branch, whose value lay only in its associations? Thus they disappeared forever: the rod thrown away or burned, the manna-pot melted down for its bullion. Thenceforth it was

as the Book of Kings asserts: "There was nothing in the ark save the two tables of stone which Moses put there at Horeb."

Does anyone ask, why were the stones saved when their two companion treasures were lost? Surely, anyone acquainted with the superstitious reverence paid to writing—above all, to inscribed stones—in the East and indeed everywhere in antiquity, will not be at a loss for an answer to this question. In themselves the tablets of stone were worthless. They, unlike the golden pot, inspired no such cupidity as might well have conquered even superstition. But, above all, they were obviously the very palladium of these Hebrews. To be sure, the Hebrews have just been well beaten. Presumably their fetish (or whatever it is in their sacred ark) has thus been demonstrated to be less powerful than the gods of the Philistines. Still—it might be best to leave these stones alone: it can do no good to smash them, and perhaps this writing will bring down some fearful curse on whoever injures it. Certainly, the event would serve to justify to the Philistines the wisdom of this line of reasoning, as the story in Samuel well shows.

We are brought thus to the final step in this attempt to solve, by common sense and imagination, what the Scriptures have left unsolved. It is a fascinating tale of the ark's sojourn in the Philistine cities, and of its manner of being returned to Israel. A part of the story is the making by the Philistines, at the advice of their "priests and diviners," of two special offerings in gold, that are termed a "trespass offering" to the Lord of the ark, who had smitten them and their god Dagon. Golden jewels of mice and of the tumours of their plague were made by their goldsmiths. These were placed in a coffer that rested beside the ark on the cart on which it was returned. Perhaps it would be too much to say that *two* such trespass offerings were given just because they had destroyed *two* sacred objects from the contents of the ark. But, at least, it fits in admirably with the natural suppositions of the story. In their anxiety to appease the offended but immaterial Deity of this ark, they want to make good, by the choicest in their power, that of His which they had destroyed or stolen. Symbol for symbol, the Hebrews could thus, as long as they cared to, preserve and hand down these new evidences of the miraculous might of their God, who had smitten with His curse a nation too strong

for His people to resist. The fact that we do not hear anything further of these golden jewels need not surprise us. They represented the Philistines' point of view. It was not necessarily the point of view of David or Solomon or their priests. The jewels may well have been melted down for use in that "magnificent house" built at length to the glory of the God of Israel.

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