
Adventist Raiders of the Lost Ark

by Patti Hansen Tompkins

The script for the expedition could have been drafted by Steven Spielberg, whose "Raiders of the Lost Ark" the Adventist explorers were in a sense emulating.

Arriving near a Franciscan monastery on a hillside, they deftly left their driver on one side of the hill. Then while several members of the party distracted an armed Bedouin guard, the others scoured the hillside until they found a concealed opening near an outer fence, approximately 300 feet from the monastery.

Two days later, they returned and again diverted the guard so they could explore the opening. Ron Spear and Alan Newhart were lowered through the opening into a chamber approximately 12 feet square. Inside the chamber, and down a passage way, Newhart took photographs of what appeared to be the place where a tunnel should have been. However, to the excited raiders, the wall of the passageway appeared to have been cleverly plastered to conceal the entrance to the tunnel, and they

were unable to proceed with their investigation.

Members of this expedition are convinced that the Ark of the Covenant is in that cave under Mt. Nebo. They acknowledge that they took a "terrible risk" in entering the chamber without permission from Jordanian officials. The risks are heightened by the strategic location of Mt. Nebo on the Jordanian-Israeli border. A few days before the arrival of the Adventist searchers for the ark, Israel had invaded its northern neighbor, Lebanon, and Jordan had militarized its territory adjoining Mt. Nebo. Jordanian officials were concerned that if something reputed to be the Ark of the Covenant were found in the area, Israel might be tempted to invade Jordanian territory, also, to retrieve it.

It is not surprising that teams of amateur archaeologists acting on the basis of their interpretations of prophecy are causing problems for recognized archaeologists. Andrews University's Madaba Plains Project, near Mt. Nebo, has been affected by the surreptitious work of religious groups in Jordan. In 1983, for the second year in a row, the Andrews project has been canceled,

despite the fact that Andrews' archaeological expeditions are highly praised. In his book *American Archaeology in the Mideast*, Philip J. King says, "The archaeology of Jordan owes an extraordinary debt of gratitude to the Hesban expedition (led by Andrews' scholars), especially for its pioneering efforts in many areas of archaeological research."

The Adventist group that visited Jordan in 1982 has not been alone. Over the past four years, there have been an undetermined number of expeditions to the Holy Land by groups with strictly religious reasons for wanting to find the ark. Of these expeditions, four are worth noting here, three because of Adventist involvement and the fourth because of the international attention it attracted.

The first of the four was undertaken by an Adventist group led by Lawrence W. Blaser of Denver. Siegfried Horn, respected Adventist archaeological authority, was invited to accompany the group but declined. The group then obtained the services of an archaeologist from Florida, went to the area of the Dead Sea for a brief stay and returned without evidence of finding the ark.¹

The second Adventist lay expedition took place in September 1979, as the result of a chain of events begun one year previously. In September 1978, Jack Darnall of North Fork, California, received a strong impression that God wanted him to build a temple for Him. Darnall describes his experience in a 32-page report entitled "Sanctuary Research," published in the summer of 1982, stating that a "respected leader in the General Conference of the church . . . suggested that it would be highly appropriate for a group of ministers who love God's law and his Sabbath to bring forth his sacred ark as a testimony to the world." Apparently on his own, Darnall flew to the Middle East to search, and claims to have been given directions by an angel to a

certain cave near Bethlehem. Here he found bits of pottery dating between 700 and 586 B.C., thus convincing him that he had indeed found the cave where the ark was hidden.

Darnall returned home, telling his story in hopes of raising money to build a temple to contain the ark in California. According to his report in "Sanctuary Research," at least \$15,200 was raised, and a structure was built. Much of the report is an explanation of problems that later developed, resulting in the loss of the temple structure and property to a group unsympathetic to Darnall's cause. But he has not lost heart. In his report he states:

If God led me to the right cave, among the thousands of caves in Israel, and we do find the ark in it, then it follows that the same God gave us the right plan and the right place to house the ark. Furthermore, when the ark is brought forth by our group, it will show you that God first gave us the commission to build His Covenant Tabernacle, then to bring forth His Ark of the Covenant and to proclaim the beauty of His eternal covenant to all mankind. That is the purpose of the program. His covenant is for you.²

The third, and most attention-getting of the expeditions, was undertaken in November 1981 by a non-Adventist group based in Winfield, Kansas, under the organizational name of the Institute for Restoring Ancient History International. The leader of the group, Tom Crotser, claims to have found the ark inside a sealed passageway in a cave in Mt. Nebo. Eyewitness accounts and photographs were offered as evidence of the authenticity of the find. Crotser made public his plan to enlist the aid of international banker David Rothschild to recover the ark. Newspaper accounts of the "find" make clear Crotser's motivation: "The ark would help restore the Temple of Jerusalem so that all may be in order for the Second Coming of Christ, which he predicts will occur in September or October of 1988."³

The Crotser "discovery" understandably attracted attention, not all of it favorable. It

created no small stir in Jordan itself. David W. McCreery, director of the American Center for Oriental Research (ACOR) in Amman, responded that "news of this amazing discovery . . . came as a total surprise" to himself and the director-general of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities. "Since Dr. Hadidi signs the permits which all archaeological excavation and survey teams in Jordan are required by law to obtain, and I keep track of all American projects working in the country, it was quite a shock to hear of an alleged discovery made by people neither one of us had ever heard of."

McCreery acknowledged that this was not the first group of ark-hunters to come to his attention. "In fact," he said, "they arrive and depart on a fairly regular basis. This is the first time, to my knowledge, that a group has worked surreptitiously, without the knowledge or permission of the Department of Antiquities. It is also the first time that God has been mentioned as an active staff member, directing the expedition to the site and telling the team where to dig. One would have thought that if the Almighty directed these folks to the Ark of the Covenant that he would have also informed them that it was illegal to excavate without a permit."⁴

Because of the notoriety surrounding the Crotser claims, the curiosity of several Adventist laymen was aroused. They, in turn, proceeded to investigate whether or not the "discovery" of the ark could be substantiated.

Vance Ferrell, of Harrisburg, Illinois, who already believed the ark would be found, conducted several lengthy telephone interviews with a member of the Kansas group. In 1981 he concluded that:

It does not appear this is a hoax. The individuals who claim to have found the ark were guided to it by prayer. They are Christians who felt that the time had come for it to be found . . . Perhaps our Father recognized that if Seventh-day Adventists could have received the credit for this find, it would only add additional self-satisfaction to a people who need less, not more.⁵

Several prominent Adventists were also interested enough in the Crotser findings to invest personal funds in an attempt to verify the claims. Ron Spear and Lewis Walton asked Siegfried Horn to travel to Kansas to examine the evidence. Horn, who accepted their invitation largely because of a desire to satisfy his own professional archaeological curiosity, spent one and a half hours with Tom Crotser on April 11, 1982. His conclusion was that what the Kansas group had found was *not* an ancient artifact and therefore could not be the Ark of the Covenant. This conclusion was reported to those who had requested his services and paid for his trip. Horn says he has had no further contact with these men since he reported his findings to them, and was not aware of any plans they may have had to further pursue the matter.

As already mentioned, the most recent search for the ark by Adventists took place in June 1982. Members of the expedition were Ron Spear, Charles Wheeling, and Ray Vice, self-supporting evangelists from Birmingham, Alabama; Albert Newhart, director of American Cassette Ministries in Pennsylvania; Newhart's son, Alan, a college senior theology major; Harold Conner, a dentist from Silver Spring, Maryland; Ernest Booth, biologist and operator of an educational filmstrip company in Anacortus, Washington; and David Jefferson, a Southern Baptist cinematographer.

At the same time that the Andrews University group had learned that their June 1982 expedition had been canceled, Spear's group traveled to Jordan specifically to investigate firsthand the claims of the Crotser group from Kansas. While waiting at the Amman airport for one of his own expedition members, Lawrence Geraty, professor of archaeology and history of antiquity at Andrews Theological Seminary, was recognized by one of Spear's group. When Geraty discovered the reason for their trip, he urged them to return to the

United States immediately. Geraty was extremely concerned about the possible repercussions of yet another search for the ark. He had learned that Jordanian authorities had canceled the Andrews project partly to protect it and the country from complications arising from unauthorized activities in the vicinity of Mt. Nebo. Geraty explained the gravity of the situation. However, the group felt strongly that they should stay. As Wheeling put it, "We had prayed earnestly that if God did not want us there, everything would close down for us before we left the country (United States). For some reason God opened the way, and we went."

Geraty then advised the group not to advertise that they were Adventists, not to mention the ark or Andrews University, and not to go anywhere near Mt. Nebo, as in doing so they might jeopardize the relationship of both the Seventh-day Adventist Church and Andrews University with the government of Jordan. The group agreed, saying they would remain in the country as media experts who wanted to see the country. Geraty then absolved himself of any further responsibility for the expedition members or their actions.

The following day, the group visited the Ministry of Tourism where they learned that Mt. Nebo was not off-limits to tourists. Ignoring Geraty's advice, they supplied themselves with a landrover, a driver, and fuel, and set off for Mt. Nebo.

The members of this expedition give five reasons for their conviction that the Ark of the Covenant is under Mt. Nebo.

1. The reference to the ark in II Maccabees is inscribed on a brass plaque inside the Franciscan monastery.

2. Franciscan monks are believed to be able to keep secrets for hundreds of years.

3. Mt. Nebo is in close physical proximity to Jerusalem, implying that the priests who removed the ark from Jerusalem would have had an easy time moving it to Mt. Nebo.

4. The Jordanian government canceled

all archaeological digs within a 20-mile radius of Mt. Nebo, thus "proving" that they are protecting something.

5. Someone took great pains to seal the entrance to the tunnel, again "proving" that something of value is hidden there.

While such teams of amateur archaeologists are attempting to fulfill what they perceive to be a last-days prophecy, they are at the same time causing problems for established archaeologists.

According to Michael Blaine, associate pastor of the Glendale, California, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and administrative director of the ill-fated 1982 Andrews University archaeological research team, "One must appreciate the difference between legitimate and non-legitimate work in archaeology, particularly during the present period of 'arkomania.'" Blaine defines "non-legitimate" work as that which has as its sole objective the recovery of a single artifact in order to authenticate something, rather than trying to understand the artifact's overall place in history.

In contrast, the Andrews University team work is legitimate, with the goal of "recovery of information concerning the history of the Transjordan, which has important implications not only for biblical history, but for knowledge of the Iron and Bronze Ages," which may be useful for modern regional planning in Jordan.

Blaine and others connected with the Andrews University project in Jordan believe "it is precisely the goals of the 'ark-seekers,' and the way in which those goals have been presented to King Hussein of Jordan," that are at least partially responsible for the cancellation of last summer's scheduled field work, and now this summer's as well.

Several ark-seekers have written letters to King Hussein, requesting permission to bring forth the ark in "accordance with the law of Moses," while pointing out to the king that Moses' law is "the same as" the

law of Allah. Such letters trouble recognized archaeologists. As Blaine states, "This type of request reveals either an ignorance of or a lack of regard for one of the fundamental 'laws' of archaeology . . . an artifact belongs to the country in which it is found." These letters also tend to be politically insensitive.

News media, tipped off to alleged discoveries of the Ark of the Covenant, has persistently demanded details of the find from the Jordanian government. Although the Andrews University archaeological team has enjoyed a cordial relationship with the Jordanian government and the Department of Antiquities, such harassment has understandably resulted in an attitude of hesitancy regarding any and all archaeological projects in the district around Mt. Nebo.

Blaine learned of the summer 1982 cancellation only after arriving in Jordan to begin work at Tell Jalul in June. The cancellation, says Blaine, "placed great financial stress on both the Andrews University group and some of the people who were to help at the dig, including students, teachers, housewives, and ministers, a few of whom were already en route to Amman before they could be notified."

Such turns of events have resulted in additional financial problems for the Andrews University project itself. Although its research was at one time partially funded by grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, current cutbacks have caused it to rely more heavily on corporate and individual grants. Donations from these private sources may decline, at least in part due to the confusion regarding legitimate and non-legitimate work in Jordan.

In light of these problems, Blaine and other serious archaeologists are particularly troubled by the fact that ark enthusiasts tend to describe their work in terms of "hastening the Lord's return." These Adventists bring to the search for the ark

uniquely Adventist concerns. While some Protestant fundamentalists see recovering the ark as a refutation of science and higher criticism, some Adventist searchers hold fulfillment of prophecy as the ultimate result of recovering the ark. As the years pass, a certain impatience grows in some minds regarding the importance of locating the ark. This impatience seems to be increasing for those who are counting down toward the last days of this earth's existence. Individuals as well as groups have taken upon themselves the responsibility for locating and recovering the Ark of the Covenant, believing that once it is revealed, the law of God, the investigative judgment, and the seventh-day Sabbath will be vindicated.

Neither the Old nor New Testaments gives any clear indication of where the ark is or of its future revelation. Ark-seekers pin their hopes on several other "proofs" that the ark will be discovered. Some claim to have been visited by a heavenly messenger who gave them personal responsibility for recovering the ark. Even certain Seventh-day Adventists have become involved in searches largely because of what they feel is evidence from the writings of Ellen G. White. She made two clear assertions about the history of the ark: 1) she claimed it was hidden in a cave, and 2) she asserted it has never been disturbed since it was hidden.

These righteous men, just before the destruction of the temple, removed the sacred ark containing the tables of stone, and with mourning and sadness, secreted it in a cave where it was to be hid from the people of Israel, because of their sins, and was to be no more restored to them. That sacred ark is yet hid. It has never been disturbed since it was secreted.⁶

Ellen White's writings also contain a passage that is widely interpreted by some Adventists as a divinely inspired prediction that the ark will indeed be found:

These tables of stone will be brought forth from their hiding place, and on them will be seen the Ten Commandments engraved by the finger of God. These tables of stone now lying in the ark of the testament will be a convincing testimony to the truth and binding claims of God's law.⁷

Although the statement refers only to the

display of the tables of stone containing the Ten Commandments, the conclusion is drawn that if the tables of stone are to be displayed to the world (in order to give emphasis to the seventh-day Sabbath), the Ark of the Covenant will have to be found first. Its discovery would therefore seem to be assured.

Most Seventh-day Adventists believe that the ark will not be revealed until God himself discloses it, perhaps symbolically, just before the Second Coming of Christ. The view of recent Adventist searchers for the ark is that it will be discovered in the last days just as the governments of the world are about to establish a counterfeit Sabbath. The discovery will then signal the beginning of the judgment of the living. This view is typified by the statement of Vance Ferrel that "Ellen White specifically predicted that this ark would be found and that its discovery would warn the world of the judgment and the importance of keeping the Ten Commandments."⁸

This anticipation of the literal recovery of the ark led to some confusion among Adventists following Crotser's widely publicized "discovery" of the ark in 1982. *Adventist Review* editor Kenneth Wood attempted to dispel that perplexity in his May 27 editorial. There, Wood briefly described the claims made by Crotser's group and concluded that "To know whether God will

bring forth the literal tables of stone hidden in the ark is not essential for us. To know Jesus is." Nevertheless, his discussions of interpretations of Ellen White's statements may have in fact fanned the flames of sensationalism:

"Throughout the decades some SDA's have held that Ellen White's statements indicate that the ark, containing the ten commandment law eventually will be found. Others have held that the statements are not coercive, that they may be interpreted in several ways, even in a symbolic sense. At one time we identified strongly with the latter group."

However, Wood continues that "more recently we have seen new force in a number of Ellen White statements made in 1901, 1908, and 1909," some of which Wood feels have "more than symbolic significance."

The concept that Ellen White's statements should be taken symbolically appears to be supported, in part, by a statement prepared by the Ellen G. White Estate in March 1962, clarifying the church's position on the ark:

. . . Nowhere is it said that the tables of the law will be brought forth by men as a result of finding them hidden in the cave . . . It is made clear that God, and not man, is the one who will bring the tables to view. This will be done *after* probation has closed for all men. The tables of the law will be exhibited then 'as the role of judgment.' However, we are not told in those statements which of the two sets of tables of the law will be the one exhibited in the heavens at this time.⁹

Yet belief in literal recovery—by man—of the ark persists, and with it, the possibility of continuing setbacks for established archaeological projects such as that of Andrews University.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Adventist Review* of August 23 and November 15, 1979.

2. "Sanctuary Research," p. 20.

3. *The Jerusalem Post*, November 22, 1981.

4. *ACOR Newsletter*, November 24, 1981.

5. *Pilgrims' Waymarks*, November 15, 1981.

6. *Prophets and Kings*, p. 453; see also *SG Vol. IV*, p. 115.

7. *SDA Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7, 972; see also *EW*, p. 255.

8. *Pilgrims' Waymarks*, November 15, 1981.

9. "The Hidden Tables of Law," pp. 5, 6.