

The Ark of the Covenant
(The throne of God on earth)

{Volume 4a Spiritual Gifts 114.4} [1884]

Because of Israel's transgression of the commandments of God, and their wicked acts, God suffered them to go into captivity to humble and punish them. Before the temple was destroyed, God made known to a few of his faithful servants the fate of the temple, which was the pride of Israel, and which they regarded with idolatry, while they were sinning against God. He also revealed to them the captivity of Israel.

These righteous men, just before the destruction of the temple [in 586BC], 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.

<http://bible.oremus.org/?q1=54194524>

[This is in the Apocrypha section of the Bible (Apocrypha means “not belonging”), and it was removed from 1611 KJV in 1885 – see note 1]

2 Maccabees 2:4-10

⁴ It was also in the same document that the prophet, having received an oracle [a word from God], ordered that the tent and the ark should follow with him, and that he went out to the mountain where Moses had gone up and had seen the inheritance of God. [Deuteronomy 32:48-52]

⁵ Jeremiah came and found a cave-dwelling, and he brought there *the tent and the ark and the altar of incense*; then he sealed up the entrance. ⁶ Some of those who followed him came up intending to mark the way, but could not find it.

⁷ When Jeremiah learned of it, he rebuked them and declared: ‘The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. ⁸ 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.’

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I thought you might like to read the accompanying article after our talk about the ark of the covenant being in Ethiopia. There are actually eight places that claim to have the ark, including Ethiopia, but this is the only serious contender.

What it says about the queen in the Bible.

1 Kings 10:

¹ And when the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to prove him with hard questions.

² And she came to Jerusalem with a very great train, with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones: and when she was come to Solomon, she communed with him of all that was in her heart. ³ And Solomon told [answered] her all her questions: there was not any thing hid from the king, which he told her not.

⁴ And when the queen of Sheba had seen all Solomon's wisdom, and the house that he had built, ⁵ and the meat of his table, and the sitting of his servants, and the attendance of his ministers, and their apparel, and his cupbearers, and his ascent by which he went up to the house of the LORD [all his physical things]; there was no more spirit in her.

⁶ And she said to the king, It was a true report that I heard in my own land of your acts and of your wisdom. ⁷ Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and my eyes had seen it: and, behold, the half was not told me: your wisdom and prosperity exceeds the fame which I heard. ⁸ Happy are your men, happy are these your servants, which stand continually before you, and that hear your wisdom. ⁹ Blessed be the LORD your God, which delighted in you, to set you on the throne of Israel: because the LORD loved Israel for ever, therefore made He you king, to do judgment and justice.

¹⁰ And she gave the king a hundred and twenty talents of gold, and of spices very great store, and precious stones: there came no more such abundance of spices as these which the queen of Sheba gave to king Solomon . . .

¹³ And king Solomon gave unto the queen of Sheba all her desire, whatsoever she asked, beside that which Solomon gave her of his royal bounty. So she turned and went to her own country, she and her servants.

- https://e.nationalgeographic.com/pub/sf/ResponseForm?_ri=X0Gzc2X%3DYQpgLjHJIYQGrBag7ua7dzatSGiomSISze3fqU5KTF96otqzcOyPDSzgCbmpokfm1LUVXMtX%3DYQpgLjHJIYQGku3TIWrAEskzastknFMfzd2lcSK9t2zgdSNDWNSNqXCzbzg1EzczbgaSxc&_ei=EkGg9jsJ2nIki5gKwnw83n5XbE1_jPE

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[Travel](#)

In search of the real Queen of Sheba

Legends and rumors trail the elusive Queen of Sheba through the rock-hewn wonders and rugged hills of Ethiopia.

The highlands of northern Ethiopia are renowned for its magnificent early Christian churches carved out of volcanic rock, such as the Tomb of Adam, in Lalibela.

Photograph by James Whitlow Delano

12 Minute Read

By Stanley Stewart

It was my mother who first mentioned the Queen of Sheba.

The royal name is one of my earliest memories. When someone annoyed her, I'd wait for my mother to mutter, "Who does she think she is—the Queen of Sheba?"

For me the question quickly became, Who was this queen? And where, or what, was Sheba? When I asked, all my mother said was that the queen was very wealthy and, once upon a time, lived in a palace far, far away. A palace, legend has it, in a land we know today as Ethiopia. [\[Read more about traveling in Ethiopia.\]](#)

I'm standing by the remains of a stone palace in [Aksum](#), the onetime capital of the ancient Aksumite kingdom and now a [World Heritage site](#). Many believe it also was once the home of the Queen of Sheba. The day is slipping toward dusk here in northern [Ethiopia](#). From darkening hillsides comes the soft tinkle of sheep bells.

The Ethiopian Highlands are sublime but unforgiving, with pastoralists heavily dependent on the seasonal rains in order to thrive. Photograph by James Whitlow Delano

Inside, I explore a long passageway where, once upon a time, royal guards might have seized me as an intruder. Making my way through a labyrinth of ruined rooms and passages, I arrive in a large central hall, a throne room perhaps, where legendary rulers may once have held court. Atop a keystone, a tuft-eared eagle owl turns its head to peer at me with orange eyes. Then it opens wide angel wings and flies off, leaving me alone with the biblical world.

The Queen of Sheba, depicted in a medieval German illustration. Illustration by Gottingen State and University Library

The Queen of Sheba is the Greta Garbo of antiquity. A glamorous, mysterious figure immortalized in the Bible and the Quran, celebrated in an [oratorio by Handel](#), an opera by Charles Gounod, a ballet by Ottorino Respighi, and depicted in paintings by Raphael, Tintoretto, and Claude Lorrain, she remains tantalizingly elusive to the inquiries of historians. Across swaths of modern-day North Africa her legend lives on, despite—or perhaps because of—the fact that no one knows for sure if she existed, or if she did, where she lived.

No one, that is, but the Ethiopians, to whom this queen is very real: They consider her the mother of the nation, the founder of the Solomonic dynasty that would last three millennia until its last ruling descendant, [Haile Selassie](#), died in 1975. It was from this palace, they believe (and archaeologists dispute), that their Queen of Sheba set out for [Jerusalem around 1000 B.C.](#)

The Old Testament records her arrival in the Holy City "with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and much gold and precious stones." [1 Kings 10:1-13] According to the Bible, she had come to test the wisdom of King Solomon. According to Ethiopians, [Solomon seduced her and fathered the son she named Menelik, who became the first king of the Solomonic dynasty. Years later, Menelik himself would travel to Jerusalem to see his father—and would return to Ethiopia with a rather special souvenir: the Ark of the Covenant, a casket God had asked Moses to make, according to the Hebrew Bible, to hold the Ten](#)

Commandments. The ark and its commandments still reside in Aksum, locals assert—just up the road, in fact, in a simple chapel guarded by a couple of Ethiopian Orthodox monks.

Left: The head priest of Mikael Imba Church, in the Tigray region, reads from scripture in a holy language spoken only by priests and passed down through the centuries.

Right: The 800-year-old St. George church, in Lalibela, is carved from one solid piece of rock.

Photograph by Neil Thomas

Ethiopia strains credulity. It could belong to an atlas of the imagination. The presence of the Ten Commandments offers just a hint of what this world of cloud-high plateaus and plunging gorges, of Middle Earth-like peaks and blistering deserts of salt, of monasteries forged by serpents and castles fashioned for a tropical Camelot will reveal to me. To ancient Egyptians, Ethiopia was the Land of Punt, an exotic world where the Nile River flowed from fountains. Medieval Europeans believed it was a place inhabited by unicorns and flying dragons, birthplace of Prester John, keeper of the [Fountain of Youth](#), protector of the Holy Grail, and a supposed descendant of one of the Three Magi. *[Does ancient Ethiopian culture live on in Africa? [Read about it here.](#)]*

Thanks to a remarkably inhospitable geography—Ethiopia is where [Africa's](#) Great Rift Valley gets its start—isolation was total. “The Ethiopians slept near a thousand years,” wrote historian Edward Gibbon in 1837, “forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten.” The isolation bred mythologies: Ethiopians today admit they have two histories, the one that historians work with and the one that the people believe. The historians’ need for archaeological evidence, often scarce, makes their accounts uncertain. The people’s history has confidence in its detailed, grand, often fantastical stories. Straddling both traditions is the tale of the Queen of Sheba, proof, perhaps, that Ethiopian villagers have something to teach historians.

The ruggedly mountainous, ravine-riven northern province of [Tigray](#) is considered the cradle of Ethiopian civilization. This is the land Ethiopians believe constituted the original home of Sheba, a land that now has me walking its trails. Here, the queen remains a persistent rumor, woven into village tales and depicted in frescoes on the walls of remote rock-cut churches—more than 120—that honeycomb Tigray’s mountainsides and remained virtually unknown to the outside world until 50 years ago.

In a country where 80 percent of the population remains agrarian, this produce market in the northern highlands is an important gathering place. Photograph by James Whitlow Delano

Identifying with ancient times comes easily in Tigray; daily life here has changed little over millennia. I see farmers plowing and harvesting fields of sorghum and barley by hand. With no motorized vehicles in sight, getting around means astride a donkey or on foot, which, right now, is just what I’m after. I’d been longing to get into the countryside, to feel Ethiopia under my soles, and have talked Bem, an Ethiopian guide whom I met on earlier travels and who now is a good friend, into joining me. He in turn has put us in the hands of [Tesfa Tours](#), a community tourism enterprise that, working with villagers and development agencies, has built a handful of rustic stone-walled lodges, or *hedamos*, in Tigray’s highlands. (Tesfa stands for Tourism in Ethiopia for Sustainable Future Alternatives.) Each lodge is owned and operated by a committee of villagers, who act as hosts, manage the lodge, and prepare locally sourced meals for guests.

A woman prepares lunch on the front porch of her house in the highlands, where wood and charcoal are still the primary sources of fuel. Photograph by James Whitlow Delano

Bem and I meet up with two Tesfa guides and head into the Tigrayan highlands. The landscape consists of steep escarpments and flat-topped mesas as well as gentle valleys dotted with *tukuls*, traditional round huts walled with adobe plaster and topped by thatch roofs.

Entering Erar Valley, we are silenced by its beauty. Orchards stand under lattices of sun and shade. Mingling aromas of wood smoke, harvested hay, and spring flowers scent the morning. Near us, slender men are plowing fields of heavy earth with white oxen. Children ghost through groves of trees, waving shyly at us as they herd sheep. A man near a tukul winnows wheat, throwing forkfuls of flailed grain into the air so the breeze will carry off the chaff. Over in a dry riverbed three women appear, their elegant *shammas*—full-length cotton garments—fluttering like white banners against dun-colored banks. Beyond the valley, beyond the enclosing mesas and escarpments, mountains edged the horizon, their sawtooth peaks wreathed with cloud.

The Queen of Sheba legendarily ruled over this northern Ethiopian landscape of rocky outcrops and pastoral valleys.

Photograph by Neil Thomas

We keep to the flat valley for much of the day's walk, our bags carried by a stout-bellied donkey. In the late afternoon, our guides suddenly urge the donkey toward a path snaking up the steep flank of a mesa. I ask Bem where we're heading. "A surprise." He smiles.

Our intrepid donkey leads us upward, raising a thin haze of dust. Eventually we reach the top of the mesa. The late afternoon sun rakes through expanses of dry grasses. Ahead, a troop of brown-furred [gelada monkeys](#) lope across our path, led by a shaggy-maned male.

I spot a building on the far side of the mesa, a mile or so away: the Tesfa hedamo where we'll spend the night. The small building—and my room, I soon realize—perches dramatically near an escarpment edge that drops more than a thousand feet to the valley. Westward, a vast sweep of ravines and hills marches toward the Adwa Mountains and the setting sun, now coloring half a world with pinks and golds. Where we've just come from, the light is a silvery monochrome. Above, a full moon is just breaking free of another range of mountains as it rises. For a moment, the celestial world, the heavens of the Queen of Sheba, are in perfect balance.

In the hedamo's main room, a woman from a village a few miles off is preparing coffee for our arrival. Ethiopia is considered the birthplace of coffee, purportedly discovered when a goatherd noticed the energizing effect the wild beans had on his flock. Serving coffee, always performed in front of guests, is an Ethiopian ritual as formal as Japan's tea ceremony. Settling on her haunches by a wood fire, our hostess begins by roasting the beans in a pan over a fire. As the smoke rises, she wafts it toward us so we may inhale the aroma. [\[Learn more about Japanese tea ceremonies.\]](#)

“*Betam tiru no,*” Bem says. “Very good.” The beans then are ground in a mortar and added to a kettle of hot water. The coffee will be served in small cups with a surprising traditional accompaniment—fresh popcorn.

A priest at Abuna Gebre Mikael church, in Tigray, reads the Bible. Photograph by Neil Thomas

As I sip, I catch the rich smell of cardamom-spiced stew drifting from the tiny kitchen, and soon we’re tucking into *doro wat*—a spicy chicken dish—and *kitfo*, mincemeat flavored with thyme, both served with *injera*, a spongy Ethiopian flatbread made with an iron-rich grain called teff.

After our meal I step outside. Beneath cold stars, the silence on the escarpment is total. I stand at the edge and gaze across an ink-black landscape. I know there are homesteads and hamlets, trails and fields out there—I saw them earlier—but now not a single light shows. Tigray sleeps in darkness as it has done since the time of the Queen of Sheba. Soon, after blowing out my candle and stretching back on my adobe-frame bed beneath thick eiderdowns, so do I.

For a millennium, Tigray’s villagers have congregated in ancient churches excavated from, rather than constructed with, rock. Many were carved out of precipitous rock faces so that access would be difficult. Today parishioners of the fifth-century church of Abuna Yemata Guh undertake some serious rock climbing to attend morning services. Pilgrims to the sixth-century monastery of Debre Damo are hoisted up to the chapel on ropes.

The isolation worked: Historians dismissed tales of hidden churches as fanciful exaggerations until the 1960s. In a list compiled in 1963, only nine rock-cut churches were identified in the region. Tigray proved too remote for further investigation—until an Ethiopian historian, Tewolde Medhin Joseph, saw the list, heard the tales, and donned hiking boots to look for himself. In 1966, at a conference of Ethiopian studies, he presented a new list. There were, he declared, 123 rock-cut churches, many in the most spectacular locations, and most still in use. Some may date as far back as the fourth century A.D., placing them among the oldest surviving Christian sanctuaries. They are older even than the monolithic [churches at Lalibela](#), Ethiopia’s most famous destination, some 250 miles south.

The resident priest of Abuna Yemata Guh rests under a sacred olive tree before embarking on his daily precipitous climb up to the church, which is hewn out of a high rock face. Photograph by Neil Thomas

My Tigray trek takes me to one of the 123, Maryam Korkor, thought to be well over a thousand years old and marked by a simple wooden door in a cliff face. A priest materializes with a key the size of a truncheon to open the medieval lock. From the heat-blasted afternoon we step into a cool dim world. The interior, I see immediately, has ambitions to architecture. A dome of four vaulted arches is carved from the ceiling, chisel cuts still evident. Newly cut grass lies scattered across the floor, “to bring the freshness and fragrance of nature into the church,” says the priest, a young man with long, elegant hands and an unsuccessful beard. Sounds of the village below—donkeys braying, children playing, a woman calling to a neighbor—slide through the open door, all muted, disembodied, ethereal.

I spot a curtain hanging against the rough-hewn eastern wall, barring passage to an inner sanctum. The priest explains that it holds a copy of the Ark of the Covenant and the Ten

Commandments and repeats what I hear often: The real Ten Commandments reside in Aksum, where we now head after three days of trekking. Aksum dominated the trade routes between [Africa](#) and [Asia](#) for a thousand years. The legends speak of a great city that experienced showers of gold, silver, and pearls, of stone pillars that rose to scrape the underside of the sky, of the Queen of Sheba and her grand court. History is more hesitant.

Remnants of a great city are real enough, I see immediately, scattered about the dusty streets of the modern town. Especially prominent are colossal stone obelisks commemorating Aksumite rulers. They don't quite scrape the underside of the sky (sadly, most have fallen and lie on the ground), but the grandest—a hundred feet long, probably 1,600 years old, and now broken into several parts—is thought to be the largest single block of stone humans ever attempted to erect. These stelae mark the sites of royal underground tombs that Bem is eager to show me. He directs me to a passageway that narrows as it descends. We emerge into a series of subterranean chambers. The ceilings are low, the walls bare, stripped of decorative wealth centuries ago. We find the Tomb of the Brick Arches, which reveals rooms with horseshoe-shaped arches. Our voices echo against the hard stone. In the Tomb of the False Door—named for the carved door that conceals the entrance—we find ourselves whispering, the silence is that powerful.

As powerful is the mystery surrounding the Ark of the Covenant, which Ethiopians maintain was carted off from Solomon's Temple to Aksum by Menelik, when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem. [586BC] The ark and its commandments reside, as far as anyone can ascertain, in a chapel on the grounds of the [Church of St. Mary of Zion](#). I peer through the railings at two monks guarding the chapel door. It's said these guardians have been trained to kill with their bare hands. Historians and archaeologists would dearly love to examine the treasure, but the chapel is off-limits to all but a few members of the Ethiopian Christian church hierarchy, hindering any independent confirmation of their authenticity.



Picture of Chapel of the Tablet near the Church of St. Mary of Zion, in Aksum, Ethiopia

Near the Church of St. Mary of Zion, in Aksum, the unassuming Chapel of the Tablet (at left) is said to enshrine the Ark of the Covenant, the chest holding the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Photograph by Martin Gray/National Geographic Creative

Twilight is gathering and I have yet to see the Queen of Sheba's palace. I hurry to the site west of town and find myself clambering over the back wall to wander alone through the haunted ruins. But haunted by what? Archaeologists date the palace tentatively to the sixth century B.C., when the Queen of Sheba would have been dead for several centuries. They're not even sure that Sabea—the historical name for the land of Sheba—was in Ethiopia; [Yemen](#) seems to have an equally persuasive claim.

The latest archaeological discoveries may be coming to the rescue of the queen's legend. In 2012, Louise Schofield, a former curator at the [British Museum](#), began excavations at Aksum and found considerable evidence of Sabean culture—including a stone stela inscribed with a sun and a crescent moon, “the calling card of the land of Sheba,” say experts. Sabean inscriptions also were uncovered. Then Schofield struck gold, literally, when she identified a vast, ancient gold mine, quite possibly the source of the queen's fabulous wealth.

Excavations in 2015 revealed two female skeletons buried in regal style and adorned with precious jewelry. Much work remains—90 percent of Aksum is unexcavated—but the Ethiopian legends that surround Aksum and the palace in which I am standing are beginning to gather historical support. Perhaps the two traditions are not divergent after all.

The following morning I will visit another palace, of the wealthy sixth-century King Kaleb, an Aksumite ruler with sounder historical documentation who reigned during Aksum's height. But it won't be the palace that will capture my attention. It will be a humble footpath. Hardly more than a farmer's track, the path leads past the palace, down a slope, and across a valley of fields. This was Aksum's chief trade route, a road as storied as the Silk Road, connecting Aksum to the Red Sea port of Adulis—and the world beyond. In Aksum's imperial heyday, caravans from all over Asia and [Europe](#) traveled this way carrying silks from [China](#), spices from [India](#), oil from the Italian peninsula, and gold from Aksum's famous mines.

Things are quieter these days. The only traffic I see is a woman leading a donkey carrying a sack of flour, bound not for Persia or India but the village just beyond the hill. A shepherd with a white cloak and a crook appears with his flock. He pauses to greet me. While his sheep drift toward their morning pasture, he takes a seat beside me on the low wall of the old palace and asks what has brought me to this place, why I've traveled halfway round the world to sit on an old wall.

“The Queen of Sheba,” I say, and he brightens.

“She went to Jerusalem and came home on this path,” he says, then draws a line in the dust with his crook. “This was the way home from Jerusalem. She passed this wall where we are sitting.”

Suddenly, looking out across that landscape with its meandering footpath, I feel connected to the glamorous queen more profoundly than if I'd read hundreds of histories.

Then, having conjured her from the morning air, the shepherd rises to tend his sheep before they begin eating a neighbor's crops. He shakes my hand politely and rather formally, and says how much he enjoyed our meeting.

I still have no idea how the queen acquired her haughty reputation, but her descendants in modern-day Ethiopia have all shown me warmth and hospitality and the kind of old-fashioned courtesies my mother would have admired. Perhaps their fabled queen is alive after all, in her people's dignified manner and in the collective memory of the proud land she once ruled.

Stanley Stewart's award-winning books explore topics ranging from the sources of the Nile to the steppes of Mongolia. He divides his time between Rome and Dorset, in the U.K.

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Note 1:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_apocrypha

The seven books which comprise the Protestant Apocrypha, first published as such in Luther's Bible (1534) are considered [canonical](#) Old Testament books by the Catholic Church, affirmed by the [Council of Rome](#) (AD 382) and later reaffirmed by the [Council of Trent](#); they are also considered canonical by the Eastern Orthodox Church and are referred to as [anagignoskomena](#) per the [Synod of Jerusalem](#). The [Anglican Communion](#) accepts "the Apocrypha for instruction in life and manners, but not for the establishment of doctrine (Article VI in the [Thirty-Nine Articles](#))",^[9] and many "lectionary readings in [The Book of Common Prayer](#) are taken from the Apocrypha", with these lessons being "read in the same ways as those from the Old Testament".^[10]

The first [Methodist](#) liturgical book, [The Sunday Service of the Methodists](#), employs verses from the Apocrypha, such as in the Eucharistic liturgy.^[11] The Protestant Apocrypha contains three books (3 Esdras, 4 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) that are accepted by many Eastern Orthodox Churches and Oriental Orthodox Churches as canonical, but are regarded as non-canonical by the Catholic Church and are therefore not included in modern Catholic Bibles.^[12]

<https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=Why+Apocrypha+was+removed+from+the+Bible%3F&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiFpOqynbDgAhUFU30KHdTjCiUQzmd6BAgBEBA&biw=1920&bih=944>

After the Lutheran and Catholic canons were defined by Luther (c. 1534) and Trent (8 April 1546) respectively, early Protestant editions of the **Bible** (notably the Luther **Bible** in German and 1611 King James Version in English) did not omit these books, but placed them in a separate **Apocrypha** section apart from the Old ...