

THE SIGN AND THE SEAL
A Quest For The Lost Ark of the Covenant
by Graham Hancock

Book Review by Richard Furlong
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Warning! I am about to reveal a great and sacred mystery. Those who don't want the surprise spoiled should cover the next paragraph.

The lost Ark of the Covenant resides in the Holy of Holies of the Church of St Mary of Zion, in the town of Axum in Tigrayan-occupied Ethiopia. It is guarded by a single monk, though there are a few armed Tigrayan rebels in the town itself. A small assault team, a couple of helicopters, some smoke bombs and it's yours.

That's right! The Big Box of Goodies made by Belazeel for Moses' two tablets – which brought the house down at Jericho and smote the Philistines without the Israelites lifting a finger – is sitting quietly in a small town in war-torn Africa. This is Hancock's thesis, though it must be said that he didn't actually SEE the Ark itself – that is a privilege reserved for the reluctant monk guarding it with his life.

THE SIGN AND THE SEAL which is structured as a quest for the Ark, starts badly with a rounding-up of suspects familiar to anyone who has skimmed the HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL genre: Chartres Cathedral, the Knights Templar, and Wolfram von Eschenbach's PARZIVAL. The KEBRA NAGAST and a number of other ancient texts are given the once-over for clues, and Hancock finds it easy to unearth hidden agendas in his source material. The Scottish adventurer James Bruce – he authored the classic TRAVELS TO DISCOVER THE SOURCE OF THE NILE IN THE YEARS 1768-1773 – comes across as a scheming and duplicitous in his desire to avoid telling the truth about the secrets of North Africa. And, of course, he was a Mason, which ties him in neatly with the Knights Templar.

Chartres Cathedral, on the other hand, is a positive mine of coincidence and meaning; the notion of secret knowledge being one of the author's powerful obsessions. Hancock happens to go there on holiday and engages in a thorough analysis of the Old Testament secrets encrypted into the sculptures and official guidebook. They lead him to the saga of Parsifal, and one gigantic leap follows another until Hancock has reconstructed the Greatest Secret of All Time.

Once his obsessions have been taken aboard, the book speeds up as Hancock jets around Europe and the Middle East in his quest to prove that God's Box was carted off to Ethiopia by a group of Jewish priests who fled the bad King Manasseh during the latter part of the seventh century BC.

Though the author's style is that of an interested amateur, he has astonishing access to the major academics in the relevant disciplines and an equal willingness to rubbish any orthodoxy he happens to disagree with. Following Hancock's own line of enquiry, however, requires the reader to make regular leaps of faith.

I remain unconvinced that the Knights Templar were necessarily the white strangers wandering around Ethiopia in the late 12th century, though Hancock sees their 'Croix Pattes' everywhere. One has to wonder how, if the Ark was so important to the relationship between God and his Old Testament Israelites, Ethiopia's Nestorian Christian upstarts were able to swipe it. The argument of the *KEBRA NAGAST*, a 13th century Ethiopian text, that "the Kingdom of the Jews shall be made an end of and the Kingdom of Christ shall be constituted" really doesn't wash. The Ark had spent much of the previous two millennia effortlessly zapping anyone who tried to snaffle it.

THE SIGN AND THE SEAL has clearly not been written for religious reasons; Hancock supports the theory that although miracles can be associated with the Ark, they were worked by the ancient hi-tech used in its construction. This is the launch-pad for a voyage into the mysteries of the ancients – particularly the Egyptians – whose stock of secret knowledge (see von Däniken) was passed to a select bunch of Pharaoh's closest advisors. They included Moses, who, after the bullrushes and Pharaoh's daughter incidents, went on to acquire the technical wizardry need to build the 'Ark as Gizmo'.

The book's chief weakness is that Hancock sets out determined to prove his thesis. To make matters worse, he depends on so many "accidental strokes of luck" that one is tempted to ask whether he himself is not of the Masonic persuasion. With disbelief firmly suspended, and critical safety-valve tightly screwed down, *THE SIGN AND THE SEAL* is a thoroughly engaging read, written in an easy-to-follow, breathless style by someone who is absorbed by his task. Highly recommended for conspiracy fans; unsuitable for historians and archaeologists.