

CROSSING THE JORDAN RIVER

Summary and Historical Background

Israel faced an obstacle before they could begin their conquest of Canaan: they had to cross the Jordan River. Normally, this crossing is not difficult. The Jordan is only about one hundred feet wide as it approaches the Dead Sea and there are at least two fords near Jericho. However, the Jordan that Joshua faced was at flood stage. During the first month of the Jewish year (March or April), the Jordan usually is overflowing its banks (Josh 3:15; 4:18-19). Its depth increases up to twelve feet, so that none of the regular fords are usable. The only way to cross is to swim, which is very hazardous even for physically fit men. The current at flood-time is swift and treacherous. Furthermore, the river is full of debris and flotsam. Crossing the Jordan at flood-time was regarded as a heroic feat by the ancients (1 Chron 12:15). Obviously, it was impossible for Israel to swim across the river with its army, women, children, cattle and other possessions.

How was Israel to cross the Jordan River? Israel was not to seek for human methods in crossing the river (a bridge, pontoons, or boats), but it was to depend on God's method. Israel could cross it only by faith in God. They had to have dependence on God's promise, confidence in God's presence, reliance on God's power, and obedience to God's plan. The lessons that Israel learned in crossing the Jordan would be needed for victory in the overall conquest of Canaan.

Joshua 3 and 4 record how Israel crossed the Jordan River. Joshua 3:1-13 reveals the readiness needed for the crossing. Israel received special instructions on how they were to cross the Jordan by following the Ark of the Covenant. Joshua 3:5-13 commands Israel to be consecrated to God. Such consecration would bless them with God's presence and power. Joshua 3:14-17 records the actual crossing of the Jordan. Again Israel found God to be true to His promise and able to do what He said He would do. Joshua 4:1-24 explains why two memorials were set up to commemorate this crossing. These memorials would remind Israel of God's mighty power so they would reverently trust Him as their God forever.

I. Readiness for the Crossing — 3:1-13

3:1 — Joshua "rose early in the morning" on the day after he received the report from the spies. His early rising suggests his diligence and devotion. He had diligence and eagerness to cross the Jordan and he desired to give time to the worship of the Lord (cf. Gen 22:3; Ex 24:4).

The road from Shittim (also called Abel-Shittim, Num 33:49) to Jordan is about 9 miles, which is a normal day's march for an army.

3:2-4 — Israel's order of march was changed for crossing the Jordan River. Up to this time, the pillar of cloud had led Israel with the divisions of Judah and Reuben in first and second places, the Ark of the Covenant in the middle, and the divisions of Ephraim and Dan in the third and fourth places.

DAN >> EPHRAIM >> ARK >> REUBEN >> JUDAH >>> CLOUD —————→

Notice, the pillar of cloud would no longer lead Israel. Instead of the cloud, the Ark of the Covenant, which symbolized God's presence, would lead Israel into the Promised Land. To do this, the Ark left the middle of the procession and went to the front. Since this was such an important event, the priests carried the Ark instead of the Kohathites. Joshua gave the Lord's command to the priests to carry the Ark to the water's edge, step into the water, and

stand in the middle of the River while the people crossed the river. Then the people were to follow the Ark of the Covenant into the river, but keep a distance of 2,000 cubits or 3,000 feet from the Ark (one cubit is 1.5 feet). The people had to maintain this distance while they crossed the river, even when the Ark stopped in the midst of the river.

DAN >> EPHRAIM >> REUBEN >> JUDAH >> (3,000 feet) >> ARK → Middle of Jordan

Why was it necessary for such a large gap to exist between the Ark of the Covenant and the people of Israel? God is holy and His wrath will fall on anyone who willfully comes into His presence so that they will die. Since God was present in the Ark of the Covenant, the people of Israel needed to respect His holiness. God commanded them to keep over a half mile from the Ark. Only the priests that carried the Ark could be near Him.

God's holiness that kept Him separate from the people was not new to Israel. It, no doubt, reminded them of His holiness in the Tabernacle. Only the priests could enter the Tabernacle and only the Levites could take down and set up the Tabernacle. Any other person, even an Israelite would be killed if they came into the area of the Tabernacle. The people needed to respect God's holiness and humble themselves before Him. They had to be separated from close contact with Him because of their sins. When God's Son paid for the sins of all people by His death on the cross (1 Jn 2:2), those who believed it and received Jesus Christ as their Savior are privileged to draw close to God and call Him "Father."

3:5 — Joshua now commands the people to sanctify themselves. The word, "to sanctify," is found in the intensive form of the Hebrew verb. This verb form suggests that the activity is done repeatedly by each person. Similarly, our sanctification must be repeatedly worked by each and every one of us (Phil 2:12). The word, "to sanctify," expresses separation to God. Such separation is expressed sometimes in physical acts in the Old Testament (washing of clothes, Ex 19:10; abstinence from married intercourse, Ex 19:15); sometimes the separation (as here) is more mental, a spiritual purification of their inward attitude so that nothing would hinder their wholehearted and devout attention to God. God was about to work wonders for Israel: an unusual work far beyond human abilities; a work that would show His care for Israel. Spiritual purity is the necessary prerequisite for spiritual power.

3:6 — The bearers of the ark on this day were priests, not the Kohathites, the usual carriers of the ark (Num 3:27-31). The priests probably carried the ark because of the special work God was about to do on this day.

3:7 — God promises Joshua that He would begin to progressively elevate him in honor before Israel on this day. As God had been (historic fact) with Moses, so He would continue to be (present habitual experience) with Joshua. The Lord's presence carries the implication that Joshua needed to be as obedient as Moses had been. The Lord's presence would be progressively experienced and acknowledged by the people. One cannot hide God's presence in his life; it will be manifested to all those he or she influences.

3:8 — God gives the first test to Joshua's consecration by commanding him to relay a command to the priests. They were to march down to the edge of the Jordan and take their stand in the bank of the overflowing river. Moses had used his rod to split the waters of the Red Sea; now Joshua was to divide the waters of the Jordan with the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of the presence of God.

3:9-13 — Joshua expresses his consecration to God by his obedience to God's command. He addresses the people and relays to them the message God has given him.

He explains the significance of the miracle they are about to witness (v. 10). The people would know by experience, not just intellectually apprehend, that God was in their midst. The God of Israel is especially called, "the living God," in contrast to the gods of the Canaanites whom Israel would

meet in battle. Yahweh, the living God, is active in contrast to the idols, which are lifeless and must be carried about by their worshippers. He has life in Himself, in contrast to the demons, who owe their life to God. God is not only present with Israel, but He is also powerful. The phrase, "He will without fail drive out." is a strong phrase in the Hebrew, which literally says, "Driving out he will drive out." (Cf. Gen 2:17; the KJV says "thou shalt surely die." but literally it reads "dying thou shalt die").

The preparation for the miracle is seen in 3:11 and 13. The priests were to take the ark and go before the people into the Jordan. As soon as their feet hit the edge of the waters, the waters would be cut off and stand further upstream in a heap. Joshua relays a command that is contrary to Israel's past practice, to human prudence, and to elementary physics (priests' feet do not usually cause flood waters to stop flowing!). Joshua shows that he has learned the principles of Joshua 1:1-9 (Be active! Be courageous! Be spiritual!). If God says it, Joshua believes it and obeys it.

Joshua also prepares for the remembrance of the miracle in 3:12 with the choice of twelve men. Their function will be further explained in chapter 4.

II. Realization of the Crossing — 3:14-17

3:14 — The people and the priests believed and obeyed God.

3:15-17 — God honors the faith of Israel and His promise to Israel. As soon as the feet of the priests hit the water, the waters were cut off, gathered into a heap, and Israel crossed on dry ground. The "dry ground" means more than a lowering of the flood to normal conditions or even to a wet, soft river bed. "Dry ground" is related to a word in Arabic which refers to a land that is void of water and vegetation, that is, a desert. In Isaiah 48:21 a related Hebrew word is translated, "deserts." Israel did not have any residual moisture or pools to avoid as they crossed the Jordan. The river bed, overflowing with water not five minutes before, became as dry as the Sinai desert. The waters stood in a heap about fifteen miles north, at Adam. (The King James says "very far from the city of Adam," which is misleading. The Hebrew literally reads "at Adam, a city which is beside Zarethan"). The dry condition of the riverbed and the timing of the water stoppage demand a miracle.

III. Reminders of the Crossing — 4:1-24

4:1-3 — God now commands Joshua to take one man from each tribe. Each man was to take one stone from where the priests were standing and he was to carry the stone to where Israel would camp.

4:4-8 — Again Joshua obeys God's command. These stones, gathered from the river bottom, were to be taken to the Israelite encampment and set up as a memorial. These stones would help Israel remember God's miraculous act for them from generation to generation for all time.

4:9 — A second memorial was set up in the river Jordan, where the priests stood. This memorial would be visible when the water was low, and it was still standing twenty years or so later when the book of Joshua was written.

4:12, 13 — Forty thousand of the armed men of the tribes of Gad, Reuben, and Manasseh crossed over the Jordan with the other tribes. They crossed over to fulfill the promise that they made to Moses in Num 32:16-18. These were not all of the men of these three tribes (there were about 110,000 of military age), but this was all that Joshua required. The rest remained behind to help protect the women and children of these tribes.

4:15-18 — Again a command is given by God which Joshua relays to the priests and they obey. God miraculously demonstrates His power by releasing the waters of the Jordan immediately as the priests stepped out of the riverbed. Once again the river returned to flood stage.

4:21-24 — Joshua explains to the children of Israel the reason for the memorial. In the future, children would ask their parents the meaning of the stones. The parents would tell the three facts which the stones memorialized:

(1) The stones would remind Israel of the fact of the miracle: "Israel came over this Jordan on dry ground." (Ezekiel 37:11 uses "dry" for dry bones.)

(2) The stones would remind Israel of the Source of the miracle: "The Lord your God dried up the waters of Jordan." The Source of their deliverance in the Red Sea is the same One who opened the way to their inheritance through the Jordan River. Two implications are suggested: (a) God is immutable. His power is always able to deliver His people. (b) Man needs the same kind of power both in his salvation and his sanctification. The same kind of power needed for spiritual birth is needed for spiritual progress.

(3) The stones would remind Israel of the purpose of the miracle. The miracle was a testimony of the power of God to the surrounding nations. The miracle would remind Israel of their duty to fear and reverence God all the days of their life and for all time.