



Joshua - Chapter Three

I Joshua 1:1-5:15 - Crossing into the Land (continues)

Summary of Chapter Three

The time has come for the Israelites to embark on the final stage of their journey to cross the River Jordan and enter the Promised Land. They are instructed to become ritually clean and to move out at a certain distance when they see the priests set off carrying the Ark of the Covenant.

God is going to exalt Joshua in his leadership before the people. When the priests step into the river, the waters will pile up before them. With the priests holding the Ark in the centre of the river's course, the entire nation of Israel crossed on dry ground.

I.c Joshua 3:1-4:24 - Crossing the Jordan River

Chapters 3 and 4 form a unit, bound together by the common theme of the Jordan crossing. The Hebrew verb meaning 'to cross (over)' is Hebrew 'abar' and occurs more than twenty times in these chapters alone, more than one third of the total occurrences in the Book of Joshua. References to God exalting Joshua also indicate that the chapters are to be read together.

The apparently repetitive layout of this material relates to the literary structure: the crossing and its commemoration with memorial stones are first anticipated briefly and then described from various angles, in much the same way that a film director sometimes repeats a significant event first from one angle, then from another. In a historical narrative, even simultaneous events must be described sequentially. The actual historical sequence would have involved first the blockage and crossing of the River Jordan and then the setting up of memorial stones, taken from the river bed, at Gilgal.

I.c.i Joshua 3:1-17 - Israel Crosses the Jordan

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Early in the morning Joshua rose and set out from Shittim with all the Israelites, and they came to the Jordan. They camped there before crossing over.

Joshua 3:1

Shittim was their starting point east of the River Jordan and was commented on fully at Joshua 2:1.

They came to the Jordan. They camped there before crossing over. God told the people of Israel to wait three days at shores of the Jordan River in Joshua 1:11. All that time, the people of Israel saw a rushing river, swollen with spring rains in front of them, apparently blocking their only crossing point. They must have asked, “How can we ever cross this river?” It was one thing for a few spies to make their way across, as happened in Joshua Chapter 2, but here a nation of more than a million people is involved, with all their possessions and animals. How will they make it? At a moment like this, all the wonderful talk about living in the Promised Land can sound pretty hollow. There is a seemingly impossible obstacle blocking the way, how will God overcome this it?

² At the end of three days the officers went through the camp ³ and commanded the people, ‘When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Follow it, ⁴ so that you may know the way you should go, for you have not passed this way before. Yet there shall be a space between you and it, a distance of about two thousand cubits; do not come any nearer to it.’

Joshua 3:2-4

At the end of three days. In Joshua 1:11, the officers alerted the people that they would cross over the Jordan ‘within three days.’ Now at the end of three days of preparation, the officers appear to give more specific instructions. But how does this sequence fit with the fact that the spies who were sent out in Chapter 2 found it necessary to hide in the hills for ‘three days’ in Joshua 2:22 before returning to report to Joshua in 2:24? One possible solution is that the three day periods mentioned in 1:11 and here in v.2 are distinct, in which case the crossing of the Jordan would have taken place on the seventh day. Another solution is that Joshua had sent the spies prior to his words in 1:11.

When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God being carried by the levitical priests, then you shall set out from your place. Joshua did not send his Army Corps of Engineers first. Instead, he sent the priests who carried the Ark of the Covenant, which was the visible representation of God's presence with the people. Joshua knew this was a spiritual problem, not a feat of human engineering.

On the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and its significance as symbolising and mediating the Lord's presence, refer to Exodus 25:10-22. When not accompanying the Israelites into battle or preceding them through the Jordan, the ark was normally kept in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle and later in the temple. As passages such as 1 Samuel Chapters 4-6 and 2 Samuel Chapter 6 dramatically demonstrate, the ark was not a magical object and was not to be trifled with.

Two thousand cubits is just over half a mile or 0.8 km. The explicitly stated reason that the Israelites were to maintain this distance between themselves and the ark was so that you may know the way you should go. From a distance of half a mile, more people would have been able to see the ark and thus follow its path. The sacrosanct nature of the ark may also have prompted this safe distance, but this is not stated. What it does show is that the Ark of the Covenant led the way. Israel would accomplish this impossible task as they set their eyes upon God's presence, and followed only after his presence.

It was for a similar reason that Peter could both walk on water and sink: <<Peter answered him, 'Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.' He said, 'Come.' So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?''>> (Matthew 14:28-31). **To start with his focus was on Jesus; then his focus was on what was around him.**

⁵ Then Joshua said to the people, 'Sanctify yourselves; for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you.' ⁶ To the priests Joshua said, 'Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass on in front of the people.' So they took up the ark of the covenant and went in front of the people.

Joshua 3:5-6

Sanctify yourselves. Because this would be a spiritual battle, Joshua requires that the people have a spiritual preparation, focusing on God. Compare this with the Lord's instructions through Moses at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:10-15. Sanctifying, or separating oneself, included washing one's clothes and temporarily abstaining from

sexual relationship with one's spouse: <<*So Moses went down from the mountain to the people. He consecrated the people, and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, 'Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman'*>> (Exodus 19:14-15).

The notice that the Lord is about to perform wonders among the people, anticipated in Exodus 34:10-11, further underscores Joshua's role as Moses' successor. The plagues visited on the Egyptians at the time of the exodus under Moses' leadership were described as wonders: <<*So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go*>> (Exodus 3:20), and they are a cause for celebration: <<*Sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of all his wonderful works*>> (1 Chronicles 16:9).

Take up the Ark of the Covenant, and pass on in front of the people. Even with God's specific guidance, and with specific guidance from his Word, this is still an impressive step of faith for Joshua. Living and walking in the Promised Land comes from this kind of faith, not a slavish reliance on a 'law' relationship with God. Faith leads into greater victories than law ever could: <<*For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith*>> (Romans 4:13), and the victory of the spiritual battles: <<*More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death*>> (Philippians 3:8-10).

⁷ The Lord said to Joshua, 'This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. ⁸ You are the one who shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, "When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan."'"

Joshua 3:7-8

This day I will begin to exalt you. Through Joshua's leading the people safely through the Jordan River, the Lord exalts Joshua so that the people <<*stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life*>> (Joshua 4:14b). King Solomon was raised up in similar fashion: <<*The Lord highly exalted Solomon in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed upon him such royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel*>> (1 Chronicles 29:25), but it is the Son who is lifted up above everything else: <<*Therefore God*

also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father>> (Philippians 2:9-11).

So that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses. God will make Joshua a leader like Moses in the eyes of the people, and he will do it by using Joshua to miraculously lead the people across an impossible body of water.

After Joshua had obeyed the previous guidance, based on faith and his understanding of God's Word, now God gives him more specific instructions: When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.

⁹ Joshua then said to the Israelites, 'Draw near and hear the words of the Lord your God.' ¹⁰ Joshua said, 'By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: ¹¹ the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan.

Joshua 3:9-11

By this you shall know that among you is the living God. Joshua understands the way God connects events in the lives of his people. The fact that he will move on behalf of Israel here is taken as a promise of his future blessing and movement for them, and indeed for all others who seek him.

The term, the living God, appears frequently in Scripture to distinguish him from the pagan gods that were inanimate: <<*For who is there of all flesh that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire, as we have, and remained alive?>> (Deuteronomy 5:26), <<My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?>> (Psalm 42:2), <<But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation>> (Jeremiah 10:10), and: <<I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people should tremble and fear before the God of Daniel: For he is the living God, enduring for ever. His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion has no end>> (Daniel 6:26).*

God will drive out the seven nations listed, described by Moses as: <<*seven nations mightier and more numerous than you*>> (Deuteronomy 7:1b); several of these nations are attested in sources outside the Bible).

God's presence with his people is also seen in the expression translated the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of all the earth. The literal Hebrew strongly connects the Lord to his ark.

The ark is going to pass before you into the Jordan. Joshua knows that the ark will lead the way; again, this is a spiritual battle to be won.

¹² So now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one from each tribe. ¹³ When the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan flowing from above shall be cut off; they shall stand in a single heap.'

Joshua 3:12-13

Select twelve men. Anticipating the Lord's instructions in Joshua 4:2, this notice alerts the reader that these twelve chosen men will likely have an important role to play as events unfold.

When the soles of the feet of the priests rest in the waters of the Jordan. The priests begin the procession, with the Ark of the Covenant a half mile or so in front of the people, and the priests came and walked right into a river that looked like it was not going anywhere. Who knows how long the priests stood there in the river? It might have been a moment; but it may have been a long time, but in a situation like that, a moment seems like a long time! Some people want the river to be dry before they even make a step; but God was truly calling Israel to step out in faith.

¹⁴ When the people set out from their tents to cross over the Jordan, the priests bearing the ark of the covenant were in front of the people.

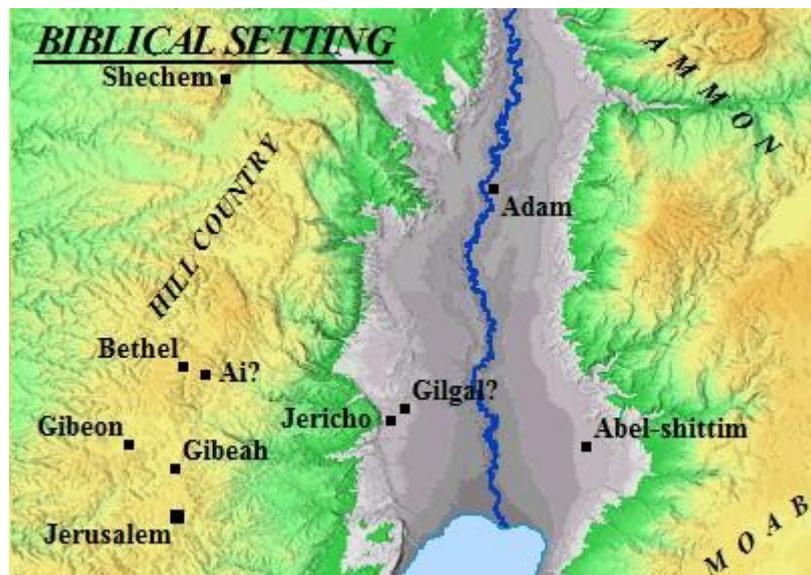
¹⁵ Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest. So when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, ¹⁶ the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, while those flowing towards the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea, were wholly cut off. Then the people crossed over opposite Jericho.

Joshua 3:14-16

At the appropriate dramatic moment, the biblical narrator notifies the reader that the Jordan overflows all its banks, caused by spring rains and melting snow from the Mount Hermon region and the Jordan's headwaters, throughout the time of harvest, i.e. the grain harvest of March-April. The Jordan's swollen waters would

have been considerably more daunting than the river at its normal 3 to 10 foot or 0.9-3.0m depth and 90 to 100 foot or 27-31m width. Crossing such water would be no less miraculous than crossing the Red Sea: <<*For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over*>> (Joshua 4:23).

Heap is the same term used in the poetic celebrations of the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 15:8 and Psalm 78:13. It is particularly appropriate in the present passage, which adds the detail that the heap of water was far off at Adam. This apparently means that the water was stopped as far upriver as Adam, identified with modern Damiya, east of the Jordan and just south of the confluence with the Jabbok River, therefore about 18 miles or 29 km north of the fords of the Jordan. It is a place where mudslides have occasionally completely blocked the Jordan's southward flow, most recently in 1927 for some 20 hours. When the text says that the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap, the implication is that a supernatural act has occurred: either the waters stopped with no visible physical obstruction holding them back, or else a mudslide blocked the river, supernaturally timed to coincide with the priests' dipping their feet in the brink of the water.



The map shows the location of Adam to the north of where the Israelites crossed the river opposite Jericho.

That it was a supernatural act is also confirmed in the account of Elijah and Elisha: <<*Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground*>> (2 Kings 2:8), and: <<*He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the*

water, saying, 'Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?' When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over>> (2 Kings 2:13-14).

¹⁷ While all Israel were crossing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan, until the entire nation finished crossing over the Jordan.

Joshua 3:17

All Israel; the entire nation. Apart from anticipations such as: <<*you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation*>> (Exodus 19:6a), and the promise to Abram that God would make him <<*a great nation*>> (Genesis 12:2a), Israel is not called a nation until now. In Egypt and in the wilderness, Israel was a 'people'; now, with their having entered the Promised Land, the term nation begins to apply.

How did it happen? What was the key to this amazing miracle? Notice the centrality of the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord. The ark is referred to fourteen times in these seventeen verses. This was all about the trust that Joshua, the priests, and Israel had in the God they knew was present with them. The Ark of the Covenant cleared the way for Israel. This was spiritual work, not work for Israel's Royal Engineers.

To face such impossible challenges in life, people must look to Jesus, their Joshua. He always leads:

- Jesus is the fulfilment of the ark; he is Emmanuel, which is translated, <<*God is with us*>> (Matthew 1:23).
- Jesus has cleared the way to victory over all things: <<*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it*>> (Colossians 2:15).
- As believers keep their eyes on, and follow behind their victorious Jesus, the river of impossibility will dry up.
- The cynic, who wonders if they have not tried that and been disappointed, must be asked: "Have you really tried this? Have you truly walked according to God's Word, trusted in Jesus and been disappointed?" Perhaps your disappointment is actually in your own flesh.