



Joshua - Chapter Four

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

I.c Joshua 3:1-4:24 - Crossing the Jordan River (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Four

After the entire nation had crossed the River Jordan on dry ground and entered into the Promised Land, Joshua instructed the twelve chosen men to each take a stone from the middle of the river bed with them. In addition, it seems that Joshua built a memorial on the river bed itself. Once all this was completed, the priests exited the river bed carrying the Ark of the Covenant. As soon as they had reached the far bank the waters of the river were fully restored.

The twelve stones were then set up as a memorial at Gilgal so that future generations should know of the power of God in allowing his people to enter the land via the river in the same way as he had allowed them to cross the Red Sea when he brought them out of Egypt.

I.c.ii Joshua 4:1-24 - Twelve Stones Set Up at Gilgal

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua: ² ‘Select twelve men from the people, one from each tribe, ³ and command them, “Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood, carry them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you camp tonight.”’ ⁴ Then Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. ⁵ Joshua said to them, ‘Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan, and each of you take up a stone on his

shoulder, one for each of the tribes of the Israelites, ⁶ so that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, “What do those stones mean to you?” ⁷ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial for ever.’

Joshua 4:1-7

When the entire nation had finished crossing over the Jordan. Israel was now on the other side of the Jordan, in the Promised Land. But what is life in the Promised Land like? Is it one glorious vacation time after another? No; for Israel it was a place of battle, but most of all, it was a place of trust. They knew they had to trust God with everything they had, because the challenges only increased in volume and magnitude in the Promised Land, but so did the blessings.

Most people would have wanted to rush on through and take care of Jericho, why not take advantage of the time when the inhabitants are so afraid? However, God is never in a hurry; and he knows that beyond his people doing something, they must become something for him, so he takes time out to conquer Israel spiritually before they can conquer Jericho under his guidance.

The Lord’s instruction that Joshua should select twelve men, one from each tribe was apparently already anticipated by Joshua in 3:12 and is immediately confirmed: Joshua summoned the twelve men from the Israelites, whom he had appointed, one from each tribe. Each of the twelve tribes is represented, which signifies the importance of the Jordan crossing for all Israel.

Take twelve stones from here out of the middle of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood. Each tribe was to send a representative to take a stone, undoubtedly a large one, from the dry river bed where Israel had crossed over, so that the stones could be set up as a memorial in line with the will of God: *<<On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster>>* (Deuteronomy 27:2). It is unclear whether the fact that the priests had stood on that particular spot had any significance for the stones selected other than the fact that the ark had been held there too. Thus the stones and the presence of God are linked.

When your children ask in time to come. The purpose of this memorial was so that the people of Israel could teach their children about the great things God had done, so that the work of God would not be forgotten among the generations. People often fail in their trust of God because they forget the great things he has

done, and often the faith of their children is weak because they have never been told how great God is and how real his working is in their lives.

One of the key themes of the Book of Deuteronomy is that the people should remember what God had promised the Patriarchs and what he had done to bring the people out of Egyptian slavery and sustain them in the wilderness for forty years. There are fifteen such statements in that book alone.

⁸ The Israelites did as Joshua commanded. They took up twelve stones out of the middle of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, as the Lord told Joshua, carried them over with them to the place where they camped, and laid them down there. ⁹ (Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day.)

Joshua 4:8-9

Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan. Joshua also set up a pile of memorial stones in the very bed of the river Jordan, so that when it was lowered in a season of drought, those stones could be seen and would testify of the time that God had completely dried up the Jordan. Especially in a time of drought, people need to remember the great things God has done.

Commentators are divided over whether or not this represents a second group of stones in addition to those set up in Gilgal (v.20). A face-value reading of the Hebrew text could suggest a second memorial, but the larger context suggests only one set of stones. Further, some read the Hebrew to the effect that Joshua had already set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan.

To this day is the first occurrence of a phrase that appears frequently in the Book of Joshua. The day in question is the day either of the biblical narrator or of his source materials, as seen in: <<*The poles were so long that the ends of the poles were seen from the holy place in front of the inner sanctuary; but they could not be seen from outside; they are there to this day*>> (2 Chronicles 5:9).

¹⁰ The priests who bore the ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan, until everything was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. The people crossed over in haste. ¹¹ As soon as all the people had finished crossing over, the ark of the Lord, and the priests, crossed over in front of the people. ¹² The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over armed before the Israelites, as

Moses had ordered them. ¹³ About forty thousand armed for war crossed over before the Lord to the plains of Jericho for battle.

Joshua 4:10-13

The priests who bore the ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan, until everything was finished. The priests stood with the Ark of the Covenant for the entire time it took the nation to cross over. The visible token of the presence of God had to remain in the river throughout the entire crossing in order for the waters to be held at bay.

The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh crossed over armed before the Israelites. The people content to settle on the east side of the Jordan stayed on their side of the Jordan, but sent their armies over to fight on behalf of the rest of the nation, just as they had promised in Joshua 1:12-16.

The plains of Jericho. The troops passed over a broad plain between Jericho and the Jordan River, some 5 miles or 8 km east of Jericho.

¹⁴ On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.

Joshua 4:14

On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel. God fulfilled his promise made in Joshua 3:7, raising Joshua up as a great leader for Israel, even as he had done for Moses.

¹⁵ The Lord said to Joshua, ¹⁶ ‘Command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant to come up out of the Jordan.’ ¹⁷ Joshua therefore commanded the priests, ‘Come up out of the Jordan.’ ¹⁸ When the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord came up from the middle of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests’ feet touched dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before.

Joshua 4:15-18

The waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before. The manner and timing with which the Jordan returned to its natural flow shows that this event was supernaturally arranged by God, as it was at the Red Sea: <<*So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth*>> (Exodus 14:27a).

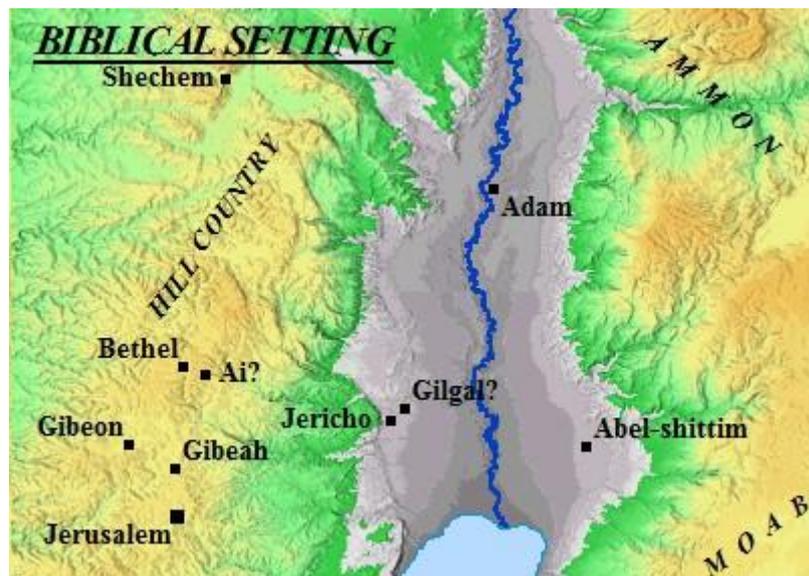
¹⁹ The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they camped in Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho.

Joshua 4:19

The tenth day of the first month. This would have been in late March. Their arrival in the Promised Land at this time allowed them to celebrate their first Passover in the land as confirmed in Joshua 5:10.

The Hebrew calendar was composed of 12 lunar months, each of which began when the thin crescent moon was first visible at sunset. They were composed of approximately 29-30 days and were built around the agricultural seasons. Apparently some of the names of the months were accommodated from Babylon following the time that the Israelites were exiled there.

They camped in Gilgal. Gilgal would become their base of operations for the conquest of the entire Promised Land. Therefore, it was appropriate that the first work at Gilgal was to set up a memorial to God's great works. Gilgal is described as lying on the eastern border of Jericho, thus in its near vicinity. Several site identifications have been considered, but none is yet certain.



Possible Location of Gilgal

²⁰ Those twelve stones, which they had taken out of the Jordan, Joshua set up in Gilgal, ²¹ saying to the Israelites, ‘When your children ask their parents in time to come, “What do these stones mean?” ²² then you shall let your children know, “Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground.”’

Joshua 4:20-22

The twelve stones that Joshua set up in Gilgal represent the first of seven stone memorials described in Joshua; refer also to 7:26, 8:28-29, 8:32, 10:27, 22:34, and 24:26-27. This first one is a reminder of God's faithfulness in bringing Israel safely across the Jordan into the Promised Land.

What do these stones mean? There was obviously a purpose in the memorial stones for the people of Israel themselves. It is so easy for people to forget the great miracles God has performed on their behalf. People do not always remember the past great works of God so that they can live in a dreamland of the past, thinking that the best days of their Christian experience are behind them. Instead, they tend to remember them as a point of faith, so they can trust God for greater and greater works in the future, because they have seen and experienced his past faithfulness. This is the purpose of remembrance when partaking of the Lord's Supper. No Christians is ever going to 'forget' how and why Christ died. They do however commemorate it as the point in history that brought real hope to the entire world: <<*For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'* In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes>> (1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

Then you shall let your children know. There was an important purpose for their children, so they would have a point of contact with God's work in the past, and remember that God's work did not begin with them and their time.

²³ 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, ²⁴ so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God for ever.'

Joshua 4:23-24

The narrator tells the account as to echo Israel's crossing of the Red Sea: the God who led Israel out of Egypt has brought them into Canaan and will fulfil his purpose through them: <<*I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*>> (Genesis 12:3). Psalm 114:3 brings together the crossings of the Red Sea and the Jordan: <<*The sea looked and fled; Jordan turned back*>>.

The dramatic manner in which the Lord brought Israel into the land was intended to alert the peoples of the earth to the fact that the hand of the Lord is mighty and to engender true devotion (which is what fear of the Lord connotes) in the hearts of God's people forever, that is, through all the generations that would hear of the river passage. The purpose for Israel and the entire world was that they would know that there is a God in heaven who can work miracles, a God they should seek with all their heart.