

Joshua 3:1-16, Preparing to Cross the Jordan

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Overview

Chapters 3-4 bring the children of Israel from Shittim and the east bank of Jordan (3:1-6) to Gilgal on the west bank (4:19-24).

In between, the chapter is organized chiastically about three execution paragraphs. In each the Lord commands Joshua (3:7; 4:1; 4:14), Joshua commands the people, and the people obey.

The focus of the whole chapter is on the stone memorials that are the subject of the second, central command (4:1-10).

The dynamics of the first two sections turn on a contrast between how Joshua and his lieutenants think the crossing will proceed, and corrective instructions by the Lord.

3:1-6, Staging on the East Bank

1, Journey to the River

Encouraged by the report of the spies, Joshua leads the people the distance of about 10 km from the Acacia grove to an encampment on the banks of the Jordan, to prepare for the crossing.

2-4, Officers: Stand Back

v.3: Follow the Ark.

- This corresponds to their general pattern of march throughout the wilderness, Num. 10:33, the ark (with the pillar of cloud and fire above it) leading the entire company.
- Note the provincial title: "the ark of the covenant of the Lord *your* God." They have a very nationalistic view of the Lord. He is their God, Israel's God. No reference to other nations.

v.4, Stand back 2000 cubits, which is about kilometer, or about 0.6 mile. Reason: be able to see the path it takes. The people are to follow the Ark, not one another; if they stand back from it, more will be able to see it and the direction it goes.

Application:

1. The Lord can lead us even where we have not been before. Sufficiency of his guidance.
2. Importance of individual responsibility to the Lord.

5-6a, Joshua's instructions

v.5, to the people: sanctify yourselves in preparation for the miracles that God will do on the morrow. Implicit details per Ex 19:14-15:

- wash or change (Gen 35:2) clothes
- abstain from marital relations.

Application: Physical gestures prepare our hearts for meeting with the Lord. These outward disciplines help to focus people's attention on the required inward attitude of reverence.

v.6, to the priests (apparently on the morrow): Pick up the ark and cross ("pass over") the Jordan in front of all the people. Presumes that the priests will lead all the way across.

6b, The priests set out

But before they get very far, the Lord intervenes with modified instructions.

3:7-16, First Execution Paragraph

This is the first instance of the three-fold pattern of a divine command to Joshua (7-8), followed by Joshua's instructions to the people (9-13) and then the carrying out of those instructions (14-16). Two more follow shortly.

7-8, the Lord's Command

Notice the Lord's *purpose* and then the detailed *command* that he gives. These will come up again in the third execution paragraph.

7, *Purpose*: to magnify Joshua in the eyes of the people and show the people that he bears Moses' authority and enjoys Moses' intimacy with the Lord. This will be achieved by opening the waters of Jordan just as Moses opened the waters of the Red Sea.

8, *Command*: The priests are not to pass over Jordan before the people, as Joshua originally instructed them in v.6, but only to step into the river and then stand there as the people pass by them. This is a deviation from the pattern in the wilderness, with the ark always in front (Num 10:33), and a step toward the new marching order in 6:9, with the ark in the midst.

9-13, Joshua Reports to the People

9, Summons

Reinforces our impression that this revelation from the Lord is "on the fly," as they are about to get underway. "The Lord just told me something important. Pay attention."

10, Lesson

From the miracle that is about to unfold, they are to understand that "the living God is among you, and will drive out" the inhabitants of the land.

- "Living" because of his power in drying up the river. The expression alludes to Canaanite mythology, in which Baal, the storm god, slays his rival, who bears two names: Prince Sea and Judge River.

SEA FELL, HE SANK TO EARTH.
HIS JOINTS TREMBLED, HIS FRAME COLLAPSED.
BA'AL DESTROYED, AND DRANK SEA.
HE FINISHED OFF JUDGE RIVER.
...
SEA VERILY IS DEAD; BA'AL RULES.

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Baal himself later succumbs to the attack of Mot, the god of death, and is mourned,

MIGHTY BA'AL IS DEAD INDEED,
THE PRINCE OF THE EARTH HAS PERISHED.

The Lord's victory over the Red Sea and the Jordan River is a response to this myth, and claims for Yahweh the position of power and victory that the Canaanites assigned to Baal. Unlike Baal, Yahweh cannot die, but is the Living God.

- "Among you," in reference to the changed order of march. God always was among his people, but during the wanderings led the way because they did not know where they were going. Now the place of the ark in the midst emphasizes that he is not far off in a distant heavenly palace (like the gods of Canaan) but dwells with his people.
- "Will drive out the nations." What hope have the worshippers of distant, dead gods, when confronted with the living God who dwells among his people? The conquest is fundamentally a contest between Yahweh and the gods of Canaan.

11-13, Directions

Twice in this section, Joshua describes the ark as "the ark of the Lord of all the earth." In contrast with "the Lord *your* God" in 3:3 (and again in 4:5), emphasizes global dominion.

v.11, the priests will lead the way into the Jordan, but not across it.

v.12, the people are to set aside one man from each tribe for a special mission, described later.

v.13, when the priests step into the river, its waters will be stopped up in a heap upstream, so that the riverbed is dry.

Application of Joshua's words: Israel's conquest is not a manifestation of their own prowess, but a demonstration of the Lord's sovereignty over the gods of Canaan. So our lives are fraught with spiritual meaning; "we struggle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual wickedness in high places," Eph. 6:12. We *are* the Lord's witnesses and soldiers in his army, whether we like it or not; our task is to be good ones.

14-16, Execution: Jordan dries up.

The narration slows down as we near the climactic event of the parting of the waters. This is all one long sentence in Hebrew, as captured in the AV. Longacre notes that this is a characteristic of Peak in narrative. Note the build-up of the frame:

- the people leave their tents and follow the priests bearing the ark
- the priests reach the Jordan
- their feet dip into the brim of the Jordan
- (and by the way, just in case you might not know, the Jordan is at its highest this time of year)

then the Lord cut off the waters at a point about 19 miles north of Jericho, modern Damiyeh, so that the riverbed drained into the salt sea, leaving a wide stretch open for the tribes to cross. The Lord has indeed smitten Judge River, just as he did Prince Sea in Egypt, and established himself as the one Living God, challenging the Canaanite Baal.