

Joshua 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Joshua chapter 3 Do not come near it, in order that you may know the way you shall go, for you have not passed this way before.

Then Joshua said to the people, Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you. And Joshua said to the priests, Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on before the people.

So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people. The Lord said to Joshua, Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you.

And as for you, command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, When you come to the brink of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan. And Joshua said to the people of Israel, Come here and listen to the words of the Lord your God.

And Joshua said, Here is how you shall know that the living God is among you, and that he will without fail drive out from before you the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Hivites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, and the Jebusites.

[1 : 29] Behold, the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth is passing over before you into the Jordan. Now therefore, take twelve men from the tribes of Israel, from each tribe a man.

And when the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.

So when the people set out from their tents to pass over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as soon as those bearing the ark had come as far as the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water, now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of the harvest, the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan.

And those flowing down toward the Sea of the Araba, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off, and the people passed over opposite Jericho. Now the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firmly on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, and all Israel was passing over on dry ground until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

The beginning of the story of the book of Joshua serves as the counterpart to the earlier story of the Exodus, and the events involved should be closely related to each other. The Red Sea crossing and the crossing of the river Jordan in our chapter Joshua chapter 3 are very similar events.

[2 : 55] In many respects they should be understood as two stages of a single movement.

Unsurprisingly, we find them spoken of in extremely close relationship elsewhere in scripture. Isaiah chapter 63 verses 11 to 14 speaks of the Red Sea crossing as if of an event that comprehends the entire wilderness experience.

Leading Israel through the deep is directly related to leading them through the wilderness. Psalm 114 also holds the two events together in a sort of parallelism. The two crossings bracket the entire transitional period of the wilderness wanderings.

The sea looked and fled. Jordan turned back. Psalm 114 verse 3. Psalm 74 verses 13 to 15 is a further example of such a close relationship.

You divided the sea by your might. You broke the heads of the sea monsters on the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan. You gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You split open springs and brooks.

You dried up ever-flowing streams. James Nornberg writes, The wilderness period itself is an expanded threshold between two spaces. A threshold that has widened to become itself a space

with two thresholds of its own.

[4 : 06] These are the thresholds marked by one generation's going out, out to the wilderness, and another generation's going in, out of the wilderness into the promised land. The momentum across such a threshold space might constitute a single momentum, as the parallelism of Psalm 106 verse 9 allows.

He rebuked the Red Sea also, and it was dried up. So he led them through the depths, as through the wilderness. This condenses the buffer space into an abridgment of chaos.

Instead, the narrative offers various objections to such an advance, whether these are generated by considerations of military strategy, or by hesitations upon the threshold, which are punished by wandering or abiding there.

In some way, Israel was qualified for the promised land by the wilderness, either penally or through probation and trial, or by preliminary service to God. The close relationship between the departure from Egypt and the entry into the land at the beginning of the book of Joshua can further be seen in the way that all of the major themes of the earlier Exodus period are repeated or resolved here.

The Jordan crossing completes the movement begun by the Red Sea crossing. The manna provided after the Red Sea crossing in Exodus chapter 16 will cease when they first eat of the fruits of the land in Joshua chapter 5.

[5 : 22] In Joshua chapter 5, the Israelites are circumcised and celebrate the Passover, as in Exodus chapter 12. Finally, in chapter 5 verses 13 to 15, Joshua meets the commander of the army of the Lord and has to remove the sandals from his feet.

This corresponds to Moses' first encounter with the angel of the Lord in Exodus chapter 3 verses 2 to 5, or in the later coming of the angel to judge Egypt. Just as the angel of the Lord had plagued Egypt with Moses and Aaron in the Exodus before the crossing of the Red Sea, so Israel, now formed into the host of the Lord, and the bearers of his battle chariot would plague the Canaanites after the crossing of the Jordan.

Peter Lighthouse writes, It is not surprising that the events of Joshua 1 to 6 closely parallel Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Since the conquest completes the Exodus, as we see in Exodus chapter 15 verses 14 to 18, it is fitting that the entry into the land is larded over with Passover Exodus allusions.

In chapter 3, the Jordan parts and Israel crosses on dry ground. Then the Israelite men are circumcised and they celebrate the Passover, which is immediately followed by the destruction of the city and the deliverance of Rahab's house.

The Exodus followed this pattern, destruction of Egypt, Passover, water crossing. Now the entry into the land chiasmatically reverses the sequence, water crossing, Passover, destruction of Jericho.

[6 : 45] The two spies who enter a house in a doomed city also remind us of the two angels visiting Sodom and delivering Lot's house. Jericho is both Sodom and Egypt, as we see in Revelation 11.8.

Closer to home, they parallel Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh. So in this way, the two accounts are bound together as an integral whole. They're inseparable stages of a single unified movement and they're bookended accounts that bracket the entire wilderness experience.

Israel is going to be led over the Jordan by the Ark of the Covenant, borne by the Levitical priests. They represent the Lord, going before the people. Whereas the Lord was present in the pillar of cloud and fire in the Red Sea crossing, now the Lord is present in the Ark of the Covenant.

The officers instruct the people to do this after three days. And we can see previous mentions of three days in chapter 1 verse 11, chapter 2 verse 16 and verse 22.

The people must consecrate themselves before the Lord leads them across the Jordan, much as Israel consecrated itself before the Theophany at Sinai. Presumably this involved washing and refraining from sexual relations.

[7 : 52] They must keep a distance of 2,000 cubits, about half a mile or so from the Ark. And the Lord addresses Joshua, telling him that he will be exalted as leader, as Moses was.

The Red Sea crossing was an event that solidified Moses' status as the leader of the people. In Exodus chapter 14 verse 31, Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

The Jordan crossing plays a similar role for Joshua. Joshua tells the people that the cutting off of the waters of the Jordan will demonstrate that the Lord will drive out the peoples of the land before them.

