

Joshua 4: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Joshua chapter 4 When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, and command them, saying, Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests' feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodged tonight.

Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you.

When your children ask in time to come, What do these stones mean to you? Then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.

So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever. And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the Lord told Joshua.

And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there.

And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood.

[1 : 22] And they are there to this day. For the priests bearing the ark stood in the midst 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 passed over in haste. And when all the people had finished passing over, the ark of the Lord and the priests passed over before the people. The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, passed over armed before the people of Israel, as Moses had told them. About forty thousand ready for war passed over before the Lord for battle, to the plains of Jericho. On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him, just as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life.

And the Lord said to Joshua, Command the priests bearing the ark of the testimony to come up out of the Jordan. So Joshua commanded the priests, Come up out of the Jordan. And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and overflowed all its banks, as before.

The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. And those twelve stones which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal.

[2 : 44] And he said to the people of Israel, When your children ask their fathers in times to come, what do these stones mean? Then you shall let your children know, Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.

For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever.

Joshua chapter 4 recounts the crossing of the Jordan, which the chapter beforehand has already done. However, it draws attention to different dimensions of the event. A very consistent feature of great deliverances and events in the Pentateuch and elsewhere is a concern for memorialisation.

It should not come as a surprise to see it here as well. God's great works must be remembered by and taught to coming generations. You can think about the event of the flood, which is memorialised in the sign of the rainbow, or the calling of Abraham and the covenant made with him in circumcision, or the events of the Exodus in the sign of the Sabbath.

There are twelve pillars set up in Exodus chapter 24 verse 4, which is similar to what we see here. And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.

[4 : 07] Festivals were also a form of memorial. Think of the Passover and unleavened bread, which commemorated the first departure from Egypt. The Feast of Weeks, again, would be connected with the events at Sinai.

The Feast of Tabernacles, again that first departure from Egypt. There are covenant renewal ceremonies. There's the second publication of the law on the plains of Moab. All of these are ways to imprint in the mind of Israel the great deeds of deliverance of the Lord, to ensure that they will never forget what has happened to them.

The Song of the Sea is another example. The calling of Abraham, the events of the Exodus, all these things are recalled in first fruit celebrations. We see a similar thing in the Psalms, as the events of God's history are recalled in song.

Chapter 4 begins by more or less repeating the words of the last verse of chapter 3. It then picks up the seemingly orphaned command of chapter 3 verse 12, the instruction to take one man from each tribe, and now we learn the purpose.

There are a number of odd repetitions like this within these chapters, and we need to recognise the way that they tie the material together. Anticipation and confirmation and command and fulfilment can be a feature of such stories.

[5 : 23] It shows that what God has commanded was perfectly carried out, or what God declared was perfectly fulfilled. Note the way that, for instance, chapter 3 verse 7 is fulfilled in verse 14 of this chapter.

In chapter 3 verse 7, The Lord said to Joshua, The Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, The stones are literally to be caused to rest in the place where they lodged that night.

Perhaps we are to see a closer symbolic connection between the stones and Israel themselves.

One stone for each tribe drawn out of the water is very clearly something that corresponds with the Israelite tribes, particularly as they're taken one each by 12 men of the tribes.

But being laid to rest in the place where they lay to rest for the first time might suggest an even closer symbolic association between the two. Just as the stones are placed in the water, drawn out of the water, and then brought into the land and laid to rest in the land, so Israel is brought across and laid to rest in the land also.

Such a miracle had a once-for-all character. However, Israel was to recall it down through their history. Joshua relays the Lord's command faithfully to Israel, and then Israel faithfully performs it.

[6 : 52] And part of what is being highlighted here is the faithfulness of Israel and Joshua at this point. They're performing what God has told them perfectly. They are entering into the land on the right foot.

The reference to the stones in verse 9 is unclear. Was there a second set of stones on the riverbed of the Jordan that would perhaps be revealed when it was really low water? Probably not.

Rather, the stones were most likely placed at the site where the priests would stand first, and then were taken up and carried to Gilgal. Verses 11 to 14 recount the crossing again, this time focusing upon the military character of the crossing and the faithfulness of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh in going ahead of the others.

There's another reference to Jericho in the crossing narrative. It's only seven miles away. They're about to attack it, and it gives us this sense of anticipation of where the narrative's about to go.

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 then is established as the successor of Moses by this event.

[7 : 57] Just as Moses was set up by the event of the Red Sea crossing in the eyes of Israel, so Joshua is set up by the crossing into the land through the Jordan River. But verses 15 to 18 repeat details we've already had.

However, they are no longer crossing over, but coming up. The narrative vantage point now lies within the land. And this is something that we often see in Scripture. Something seems to be just repetitive, saying the same thing again.

If you look closely, there are subtle details, and those details carry a wealth of significance. In this instance, I believe that is the case. Verse 18 is the mirror image of verses 15 to 16 of chapter 3. They cross on the tenth day of the first month.

This looks back to Exodus chapter 12 and the institution of the Passover. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month, every man shall take a lamb according to their father's houses, a lamb for a household.

[9 : 17] That's Exodus chapter 12 verse 3. The Passover by which they left the land is replayed in several respects as they enter into the land. In the verses that follow, Joshua instructs the Israelites in how to teach their descendants concerning the stones.

It connects the Red Sea crossing with the Jordan crossing. The purpose of the crossing of the Jordan was to demonstrate the might of the Lord to the people of the land. And note how this is fulfilled in the first verse of chapter 5.

As soon as all the kings of the Amorites, who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites, who were by the sea, heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the people of Israel until they had crossed over, their hearts melted, and there was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel.

There are two reactions then. The first is the reaction of Israel and the exaltation of Joshua in their eyes in verse 14. And now there's a second reaction. It's the reaction of the people of the land before the Israelites as they see that God is mighty and on their side.

They might also have remembered having heard of the crossing of the Red Sea and now they're seeing something that recalls that event. The same God who brought them out of Egypt and wrought great plagues upon the Egyptians has now come into the land with his people and is about to wreak great judgment upon them.

[10 : 40] A question to consider. What are some other examples of the sort of catechetical questions from children to fathers in the Pentateuch? A question to consider.