

JOSHUA 3

ISRAEL CROSSES THE JORDAN

Having previously secured a favorable report by the spies in Jericho (in Joshua 2), the Israelites next undertook their initial push into the land of Canaan by crossing the Jordan. This is the episode narrated in Joshua 3. In terms of its narrative purpose, the crossing of the Jordan serves as a liminal moment: Israel crossed over from its old identity as a group of wandering tribes in the wilderness to a new identity as conquering heroes in the land of promise. Like for Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon, the crossing of the Jordan was the point of no return for Israel. The Jordan was a natural boundary marker delineating this metaphorical (and literal) space for Israel, which the Lord had already mentioned in His initial speech to Joshua (1:2).

The procedure for the crossing is laid out in chapter 3, verses 3–6, 8, 13. The people were to follow the priests bearing the ark of the covenant, who would stand in the waters of the Jordan. As they stood in the water, the people would cross the river on dry ground, the waters being gathered up as a “heap.”¹ The ritual nature of the crossing is thus reinforced with the priests of Israel filling a crucial role in this undertaking.

The parallels with the crossing of the Red Sea as narrated in the book of Exodus are unmistakable (compare Exodus 14). Indeed, the Lord Himself affirmed to Joshua a connection between the two, saying, “This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee” (Joshua 3:7). Once again, the narrative legitimizes Joshua as Moses’s successor by the Lord’s performing comparable wonders for the children of Israel under his leadership.

¹ Joshua 3:13; Hebrew *ned*, “dam, obstruction”; compare Exodus 15:8.

Although the Jordan is a comparatively narrow and shallow river, the text informs us that the Israelites crossed during its seasonal flooding after the winter rains (verse 15). This narratively and theologically amplifies the miraculous nature of the event, as the Israelites were crossing at the most perilous moment, demonstrating beyond question Jehovah's mastery of the elements (and thereby, implicitly, of the Canaanite gods believed to control various aspects of nature). This in turn serves to reassure the Israelites (and the reader), who will soon face the daunting challenge imposed by the walled Canaanite city of Jericho.

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