

Just a Stone
Joshua 4:19-24
Pierre Cannings, Ph.D.

I. Stones that Connect vs. 19-20

- a. 10th of the First Month
 - i. The crossing of the Jordan River happened on the tenth day of the first month (i.e., the month of Nisan [also known as Abib], which corresponds with March–April). This was an important day, since it coincided with the day that the Passover lamb was to be selected (Exod 12:3). It foreshadowed the keeping of the Passover in 5:10 on the fourteenth day of the month in accordance with the Passover calendar (when the lamb actually was killed) (Exod 12:6, 18). And the fact that this happened at Passover helps to connect the crossing of the Jordan even more closely with the events of the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, which is made explicit in v. 23.
 - ii. a practice connected with observance of the Exodus passover ritual in Exod 12, the tenth day being the day for selection of lambs (Exod 12:3)
- b. Gilgal
 - i. Eastern Edge of Jericho
 - ii. Here, the Israelites celebrated several religious rituals, including circumcision and Passover (Joshua 5), and it was the place where a sanctuary and an altar were built for God (9:23, 27). It remained as an important place of sacrifice for many centuries later (see 1 Sam 10:8). It was one of the cities where Samuel judged (1 Sam 7:16) and where Saul was made king (1 Sam 11:14–15). However, worship there eventually became apostate, and two eighth-century prophets condemned it (Hos 9:15; 12:11; Amos 4:4; 5:5).
- c. 12 Stones place at Gilgal from the Jordan
 - i. The stones become a cultic memorial to the deeds of God leading Israel across the Jordan to Gilgal. Theological reflection

again shines through. The story of the Jordan crossing has been used to authorize the cult practices of Gilgal.

- ii. It is to remind them of God's past deliverance so that they may take courage in their present circumstances
- iii. Something which keeps remembrance vivid
- iv. There **the 12 stones ... taken out of the Jordan were set up**, perhaps in a small circle. The name Gilgal means "circle," and may have been taken from an ancient circle of stones of pagan significance. If so, the more recent circle commemorating Yahweh's great work would serve to counteract the idolatrous association of the site.
- v. Joshua now erected the stones that the twelve men had brought up out of the Jordan River (v. 8) as a memorial in a permanent site, at Gilgal. He had earlier set them up in the middle of the Jordan, at the spot where the priests were standing (v. 9)

II. Stones with a Story vs. 21-23

a. Generational

i. Children ask their fathers

1. But how were the **future** generations to know what the stones meant? The answer is clear. Parents were to teach God's ways and works to their children (cf. Deut. 6:4-7). A Jewish father was not to send his inquisitive child to a Levite for answers to his questions. The father was to answer them himself.
2. Such cultic language brings each generation back to the point where its faith originated and forces it to relate personally to the God of the beginnings. In this the greatness of God is recognized again.

b. Inform

i. Israel Crossed the Jordan on dry ground

1. Later generations of Israelites heard the story and applied the message to their own day. If God gave his people the land once, he could do it again, if the people had leaders and obedience as in the day of Joshua.

c. The Lord

- i. Dried up the Waters of the Jordan
 - 1. Until you crossed
 - a. the memorial stones had a broader purpose: **that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful**. As the families of Israel spent their first night in the land, their hearts may well have been filled with uncertainty and fear. The mountains rising steeply to the west looked foreboding. But then the people looked at the 12 stones taken out of the Jordan and were reminded that God had done something great for them that day. Surely they could trust Him for the days ahead
 - 2. Just as the Red Sea
 - a. God did not do miracles of the proportion of the Exodus or the Jordan in every generation. Yet every generation could devise teaching and ritual situations in which Israel could experience anew what God had done for them. For the people who followed, sanctified, remembered, and taught, God would raise up leaders in the Mosaic tradition who would teach the people the things to do to be the people of God.

III. Stones that are Known v. 24

- a. All people know
 - i. The hand of the Lord is Mighty
 - 1. Mighty- forced by (God's) strong hand
 - ii. Rahab, who acknowledged that the inhabitants of Jericho had indeed heard about how great Israel's God was, when he defeated Sihon and Og in the wilderness (2:10–11). It also recalls the purpose of the tenth plague in Egypt, which was much more than merely to convince the pharaoh to release the Israelites. Exodus 12:12
 - iii. The final verse of the section demonstrates that God had done his part. The nations whom Israel faced in the Promised Land hear the report of Yahweh's action and fear for their lives,

unable to react in any way. They have lost all spirit. Before Israel has fought a single battle, the entire land is hers for the taking. This is the message of the book of Joshua (cf. the “giving” motif of chap. 1; the confession of 2:9–11).

iv. it was to be a “sign” to all peoples that God himself was mighty, that is, a testimony to his greatness

b. So You May

i. Fear the Lord your God forever

1. Fear- Reverence, to honor

ii. an inducement to the Israelites to fear God all their days, that is, accord to him (and him alone) the worship and allegiance due him. The miracle was so amazing that it should call forth such a response from God’s people

Memorial. Something which keeps remembrance vivid. The ideas represented by the words “remember,” “remembrance,” and “memorial” are closely connected in common parlance as well as in biblical usage. The Hebrew and Greek words translated as “memorial” in the O¹T and N²T are nominal derivatives of the verbal roots meaning “to remember.” It is for this reason one cannot fully grasp the significance of the term “memorial” without first understanding something of the usage and meaning of the term “to remember.”³

In a similar way Joshua 4:7 describes setting up a monument of 12 stones in the midst of the Jordan River as a “memorial” to the miraculous provision for Israel’s crossing and entering Canaan. This memorial is to be “for the people of Israel for ever.” It is to remind them of God’s past deliverance so that they may take courage in their present circumstances.⁴

The cultic, priestly interest finds its climax in v 19. The date would be in April and is given according to a calendar beginning the year in the spring according to Babylonian practice (cf. D. J. A. Clines, “New Year,” *IDBSu*⁵*p* [1976] 625–29), a practice connected with observance of the Exodus passover ritual in Exod 12, the tenth day being the day for selection of lambs (Exod 12:3). Jordan crossing and sea crossing thus converge in the cultic calendar. The cultic site also becomes clear. Gilgal is mentioned for the first time in the book, being located even here in reference to Jericho. The stones become a cultic memorial to the deeds of God leading Israel across the Jordan to Gilgal. Theological reflection again shines through. The story of the Jordan crossing has been used to authorize the cult practices of Gilgal.

^{4:21–23} The cultic teaching form reappears (see 4:6–7). The point of emphasis is no longer the cutting off of the waters before the ark but the appearance of dry ground allowing Israel to pass over. This provides a basis for comparison with the

¹OT Old Testament

²NT New Testament

³ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Memorial.” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1434.

⁴ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Memorial.” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1435.

⁵*IDBSu* Supplementary Volume to *IDB*

Exodus event (see A. R. Hulst, *OT⁶S* 14 [1965] 162–88; R. Schmid, *T⁷Z* 21 [1965] 260–68). The teaching is now the climax of the second narrative, but its distinctive vocabulary shows that it had a separate origin from the Jordan crossing tradition. A parallel vocabulary distinction also appears in the crossing of the sea tradition (Exod 14–15). There also the early narrative tradition uses חָרַב, while the cultic, priestly tradition uses שָׁנַי to describe the drying up of the sea.

The present context uses the drying of the waters motif to underline the mighty acts of God for Israel. In so doing it uses an interesting device to define Israel. “You all”—the sons—are the Israel who crossed the Jordan. “We”—the fathers—are the Israel who crossed the sea. Liturgical teaching dramatizes the events and transforms it into personal confession and involvement. The church has done a similar thing in singing together, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Such cultic language brings each generation back to the point where its faith originated and forces it to relate personally to the God of the beginnings. In this the greatness of God is recognized again.

^{4:24–5:1} The final two verses of the section present grammatical problems. The sentence appears to end smoothly in 4:22, but it is continued by means of a temporal clause in 4:23 and a result clause in 4:24. This demonstrates the reflection of later generations on the meaning of cultic teaching. The content of the result clause is precisely the teaching of the Deuteronomic school concerning holy war. The teaching is aimed on the surface level to two audiences. First, it seeks to demonstrate to all the enemies of Israel that Israel’s God controls the military power to win any battle for Israel and thus is truly Lord of all the earth. Such reaction by the nations should then teach Israel to stand in worshipful awe of her God forever, no matter what happens. The material is not written and given to the nations. It is written and taught only to Israel. Thus the actual purpose of the writer is to bring Israel to reflect upon her history as he had done and to respond with reverence and awe to Yahweh, the God who has brought the nations to their knees. The knowledge about God results not in pride and dogmatism but in worship and service.

The final verse of the section demonstrates that God had done his part. The nations whom Israel faced in the Promised Land hear the report of Yahweh’s action and fear for their lives, unable to react in any way. They have lost all spirit. Before Israel has fought a single battle, the entire land is hers for the taking. This is the message of the book of Joshua (cf. the “giving” motif of chap. 1; the

⁶*OTS Oudtestamentische Studiën*

⁷*TZ Theologische Zeitschrift*

confession of 2:9–11). Later generations of Israelites heard the story and applied the message to their own day. If God gave his people the land once, he could do it again, if the people had leaders and obedience as in the day of Joshua.

Explanation

The experience at the Jordan River proved theologically fruitful to the long generations of Israelites. Two cultic sources eventually expressed Israel's understanding of what the miracle at the river had meant and what it continued to mean to the worshipping community. These sources had incorporated many Israelite traditions to express the total meaning of the event. The sources were in turn incorporated into an even greater literary context to continue proclaiming the meaning of the Jordan event long centuries after the event itself.

The central focus of both sources and the final biblical context is the action of God and its meaning for Israel. The presence of God, symbolized by his ark, cut off the waters and allowed Israel to enter the Promised Land. Israel passed on dry land across the Jordan. It was another Exodus miracle. The God of the Exodus was also the God of the land. In the land of a great international power and in the land of the numerous kingdoms vying for possession of Israel's promised territory, Yahweh proved himself to be Lord of all the earth. No matter where Israel found herself, she could depend upon her God to deliver her. He controlled the natural powers of the universe. He could control any enemy facing Israel.

One qualification must be made. Israel must be identified. The people of God must realize that God does not help them automatically. God helps them when they obey his commands given through his leader. The final context makes certain of these commands important. Israel must follow the symbol of divine presence among her. Only God could lead the way Israel was to walk. They must sanctify themselves, for the holy God did miracles only for a holy people. Israel must remember her tradition and devise means to teach it to her children. Israel was responsible that the reputation of God live on. God did not do miracles of the proportion of the Exodus or the Jordan in every generation. Yet every generation could devise teaching and ritual situations in which Israel could experience anew what God had done for them. For the people who followed, sanctified, remembered, and taught, God would raise up leaders in the Mosaic tradition who would teach the people the things to do to be the people of God. When miracle was again needed by such a people, God could again prove that his hand was still strong, that he could still bring fear upon the nations, and that he was still worthy of the reverential awe of his people.

Such teaching troubles the contemporary people of God. We in Jesus Christ have been stripped of national identity. We do not look for a warrior God to freeze our enemies with fear and give us a land. Our hero won the victory through self-giving and suffering. Still, we can learn from the story of the Jordan the nature of the people of God. Whatever the historical setting, the people of God still face a life confronted with opposition and are tempted to find other gods who can please for the moment. We are called again to confess that there is only one Lord of all the earth. We need not seek out new gods. We do need to renew our quest for the identity God would give us as his people and for the leaders God raises up to lead his people in the way of Moses and in the way of Jesus through our modern difficulties⁸

4:19 The crossing of the Jordan River happened on the tenth day of the first month (i.e., the month of Nisan [also known as Abib], which corresponds with March–April). This was an important day, since it coincided with the day that the Passover lamb was to be selected (Exod 12:3). It foreshadowed the keeping of the Passover in 5:10 on the fourteenth day of the month in accordance with the Passover calendar (when the lamb actually was killed) (Exod 12:6, 18). And the

⁸ Trent C. Butler, [Joshua](#), vol. 7, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1984), 50–52.

fact that this happened at Passover helps to connect the crossing of the Jordan even more closely with the events of the exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, which is made explicit in v. 23.

The Israelites encamped at Gilgal, just east of Jericho in the Jordan Valley.²⁴⁹² Gilgal was the first of three religious bases the Israelites occupied in Joshua's day. The second was Shiloh (18:1), and the third was Shechem (24:1; cf. 8:30). This is the first reference in the Book of Joshua to this important religious site. Here, the Israelites celebrated several religious rituals, including circumcision and Passover (Joshua 5), and it was the place where a sanctuary and an altar were built for God (9:23, 27). It remained as an important place of sacrifice for many centuries later (see 1 Sam 10:8). It was one of the cities where Samuel judged (1 Sam 7:16) and where Saul was made king (1 Sam 11:14–15). However, worship there eventually became apostate, and two eighth-century prophets condemned it (Hos 9:15; 12:11; Amos 4:4; 5:5).

4:20 Joshua now erected the stones that the twelve men had brought up out of the Jordan River (v. 8) as a memorial in a permanent site, at Gilgal. He had earlier set them up in the middle of the Jordan, at the spot where the priests were standing (v. 9).²⁴¹⁰³

4:21–23 The twelve stones were to be a memorial for Israel, to pass along to their children, as Joshua had stated earlier (vv. 6–7). The wording here is slightly different from that of vv. 6–7. Here, the crossing itself is mentioned, and not just the miracle of the stoppage of the waters. However, the miracle is still clearly in view: the “dry land” is mentioned in v. 22,²⁴¹¹⁴ and a new fact is introduced: the Lord “dried up” the Jordan until the Israelites crossed over (v. 23).

The similarities of this crossing of the Jordan and the crossing of the Red Sea have been noted (see comments on 3:17). Lest we miss the point, the text makes this connection explicit in 4:23. God did here exactly what he had done earlier: he “dried up” the waters. The wonder of the miracle is enhanced even further by this comparison with the defining moment at the Red Sea.

⁹²⁴² The exact phrase used here is “at the east edge of Jericho” (בְּקֶצֶה מִזְרַח יְרִיחוֹ). This is the only geographical clue in the OT as to its location; its exact site is unknown. See Boling, *Joshua*, 192, and W. R. Kotter, “Gilgal,” *ABD* 2:1025, on the geographical possibilities.

¹⁰²⁴³ The verb in both vv. 9 and 20 is the same: *hēkîm*, “set up, established (firmly).”

¹¹²⁴⁴ The word here is יָבֹשׁ (see n. on 3:17).

4:24 The miracle was performed for a greater purpose than merely getting the Israelites across the Jordan River. Here, two purposes are given:²⁴¹²⁵ (1) it was to be a “sign” to all peoples that God himself was mighty, that is, a testimony to his greatness, and (2) an inducement to the Israelites to fear God all their days, that is, accord to him (and him alone) the worship and allegiance due him. The miracle was so amazing that it should call forth such a response from God’s people.

The statement about the miracle being a testimony to all the peoples recalls the words of Rahab, who acknowledged that the inhabitants of Jericho had indeed heard about how great Israel’s God was, when he defeated Sihon and Og in the wilderness (2:10–11). It also recalls the purpose of the tenth plague in Egypt, which was much more than merely to convince the pharaoh to release the Israelites. Exodus 12:12 states that the tenth plague (if not also all the others) was God’s challenge to the Egyptian gods: “I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt.” All of these cases show that God performed miracles to attest to himself, along with the more immediate purposes of accomplishing certain ends for the people involved.¹³

4:19–20. But this was no time for reflection. **Joshua** led **the people** to **Gilgal**, their first encampment in Canaan, about two miles from **Jericho**. **There the 12 stones ... taken out of the Jordan were set up**, perhaps in a small circle. The name Gilgal means “circle,” and may have been taken from an ancient circle of stones of pagan significance. If so, the more recent circle commemorating

¹²²⁴⁵ That it was performed for these purposes is made clear by the word לְמַעַן, “so that, for the purpose of,” which is found twice in the verse, introducing the two major clauses. The statements in v. 24 are thus subordinate grammatically to those in vv. 22–23, showing that the actions there were for the purposes described here.

¹³ David M. Howard Jr., *Joshua*, vol. 5, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 141–142.

Yahweh's great work would serve to counteract the idolatrous association of the site.

4:21–23. The purpose of the stones was clearly pedagogical: to remind Israel for generations to come that it was **God** who brought them through **the Jordan** (cf. vv. 6–7) just as He had taken their fathers through **the Red Sea**.

But how were the **future** generations to know what the stones meant? The answer is clear. Parents were to teach God's ways and works to their children (cf. Deut. 6:4–7). A Jewish father was not to send his inquisitive child to a Levite for answers to his questions. The father was to answer them himself.

4:24. However, besides serving as a visual aid for parental instruction of children, the memorial stones had a broader purpose: **that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful**. As the families of Israel spent their first night in the land, their hearts may well have been filled with uncertainty and fear. The mountains rising steeply to the west looked foreboding. But then the people looked at the 12 stones taken out of the Jordan and were reminded that God had done something great for them that day. Surely they could trust Him for the days ahead.¹⁴

¹⁴ Donald K. Campbell, "[Joshua](#)," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 336.