

## the priests at the Jordan

### *Josh. 3:3-17*

**3:3** And they commanded the people, saying, When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and **the priests** the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it. **3:4** Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore. **3:5** And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for to morrow the LORD will do wonders among you. **3:6** And Joshua spake unto **the priests**, saying, Take up the ark of the covenant, and pass over before the people. And they took up the ark of the covenant, and went before the people. **3:7** And the LORD said unto Joshua, 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. **3:8** And thou shalt command **the priests** that bear the ark of the covenant, saying, When ye are come to the brink of the water of Jordan, ye shall stand still in Jordan. . . .

**3:13** And it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of **the priests** that bear the ark of the LORD, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of Jordan, that the waters of Jordan shall be cut off from the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand upon an heap. **3:14** And it came to pass, when the people removed from their tents, to pass over Jordan, and **the priests** bearing the ark of the covenant before the people; **3:15** And as they that bare the ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of **the priests** that bare the ark were dipped in the brim of the water, (for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest,) **3:16** That the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap very far from the city Adam, that is beside Zaretan: and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, even the salt sea, failed, and were cut off: and the people passed over right against Jericho. **3:17** And **the priests** that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan, and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean over Jordan.

### *Josh. 4:3-18*

**4:3** And command ye them, saying, Take you hence out of the midst of Jordan, out of the place where **the priests'** feet stood firm, twelve stones, and ye shall carry them over with you, and leave them in the lodging place, where ye shall lodge this night. . . .

**4:9** And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of Jordan, in the place where the feet of **the priests** which bare the ark of the covenant stood: and they are there unto this day. **4:10** For **the priests** which bare the ark stood in the midst of Jordan, until every thing was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Joshua: and the people hastened and passed over. **4:11** And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over, that the ark of the LORD passed over, and

### overlooked priests

The crossing of the Jordan River in Joshua chapters three and four was as miraculous as the crossing of the Red Sea (4:23) in Exodus chapter 14. Yet, the priests who carried the ark of the covenant and stood at the center of it all in the dry river bed are rarely studied.

**the priests**, in the presence of the people. **4:12** And the children of Reuben, and the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, passed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses spake unto them: **4:13** About forty thousand prepared for war passed over before the LORD unto battle, to the plains of Jericho. **4:14** On that day the LORD magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life. **4:15** And the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying, **4:16** Command **the priests** that bear the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of Jordan. **4:17** Joshua therefore commanded **the priests**, saying, Come ye up out of Jordan. **4:18** And it came to pass, when **the priests** that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD were come up out of the midst of Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up unto the dry land, that the waters of Jordan returned unto their place, and flowed over all his banks, as they did before.

## negatives

The priests who carried the ark into and across the Jordan River are mentioned a total of about 14 times in Joshua chapters three and four. That is a lot, but it does not make them the main focus in these chapters. It is wrong to ignore them, as is often done, but it is also wrong to focus on them too much.

The priests who carried the ark are unnamed, and we do not even know how many of them were involved. Probably dozens of priests helped by taking turns holding up the poles that held up the ark for 12 hours or more in total. It was NOT a small task.

Chapters three and four are quite long, in part, because the crossing itself was long. The Jordan was in flood stage at that time of year, and there were probably well over two million Israelites. There were over 600,000 armed men according to Num. 2:32, 26:51, and many other verses. (Cf. Josh. 4:12-13.)

The most serious charges against the priests in the Book of Joshua—those in the B lines below—are that they did not seem to act like the priests described in Exodus and Leviticus. At the Jordan and again at Jericho in chapter six, they seemed to be involved in a war.

*Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).*

<b>A</b>	<b>( ) The priests are not the main focus in chapters three and four.</b>
A-1	( ) The Lord is mentioned over 20 times. The priests are not.
A-2	( ) The focus is on what God did more than on what they did.
A-3	( ) The meaning of the memorial stones is the closing focus.
A-4	( ) Joshua was more important than the priests (3:7, 4:14).
A-5	( ) It is difficult to visualize what the priests did (3:15-16).
A-6	( ) They may have only been low-ranking Levites (3:3).
<b>B</b>	<b>( ) The priests were not serving in the tabernacle in these chapters.</b>
B-1	( ) They stood in a dry river bed rather than in the tabernacle.
B-2	( ) No sacrifices were offered in Joshua chapters three and four.
B-3	( ) The tabernacle is not even mentioned in Joshua until 18:1.
B-4	( ) They acted like part of Joshua's army (3:2-6, 4:15-17).
B-5	( ) Nothing is said about prayer in these two chapters.
B-6	( ) The priests did not act like priests in 3:3-6.

## positives

Are Joshua chapters three and four just a long prelude to a war between two human armies (3:10-11)? The great miracle in these two chapters and the prominence of the Lord therein shows that it was far more than that. (See 3:5.) The content of the following chapter shows this as well.

The Commander of the army of the Lord who appeared to Joshua in 5:13-15 was a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ. God himself had drawn his sword (5:13) to judge the Canaanites. This was the setting for the miracle in chapters three and four.

Before the first battle ever took place, the priests and/or Levites (3:3) are shown carrying the ark of the covenant rather than weapons. This indicates that the battle would be primarily the Lord's. Human strength and manpower would not be the key to victory. Even so, the priests had something to do.

The lines below are about the things that the priests did (C) and the setting in which they did them (D). Most lines are correct, but at least two are not. One of the most interesting points (C-4) compares the priests with the servants at the wedding in John 2:5-9.

*Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).*

<b>C</b>	<b>( ) The priests were needed.</b>
C-1	( ) The Jordan needed to be crossed (1:11).
C-2	( ) Only the Levites could carry the ark (Num. 1:50).
C-3	( ) Since they were needed, they were also very important.
C-4	( ) They were needed like the unnamed servants in John 2:5-9.
C-5	( ) They needed to stand in the dry river bed for a long time (3:17).
C-6	( ) They continued to testify about the miracle for many years (4:19-24).
<b>D</b>	<b>( ) The priests were part of something great.</b>
D-1	( ) They served "the Lord of all the earth" (3:10-13).
D-2	( ) The amount of water that was cut off was huge (3:15-16).
D-3	( ) None of the Israelites even got their feet wet (3:13-17, 4:22).
D-4	( ) The priests were closely associated with the ark (3:6, 4:16-18).
D-5	( ) They helped visualize God's presence with Israel (3:10-11, 4:11, 14).
D-6	( ) The promised land was conquered and divided up (21:43-45).

## conclusions

### worksheet answers

All the A lines are correct except for A-5. It is fairly easy to visualize the priests carrying the ark and dipping their feet into the water at the western bank of the Jordan (3:15). The group of priests who first carried the ark into the river were the only ones who briefly got their feet wet. (Line D-3 is mostly correct but still could be considered false.)

Lines B-4 and B-6 are difficult since they are about the priest's involvement in a military campaign. They carried the ark rather than swords. So it is incorrect in a way to say that they were part of Joshua's army (B-4) or that they failed to act as priests (B-6) just because they were not ministering *in* the tabernacle. That said, they still took orders from Joshua. The priests were not pacifists.

The priests who carried the ark in Joshua chapters three and four, and the servants who carried the water that Jesus turned into wine in John chapter two, are alike (C-4) in the sense that they both helped visualize the presence of God (D-5). That said, they themselves were not important, even though their work was necessary (C, C-3).

Long term, the memorial stones were important and are the focus at the end of the chapter (A-3). These stones were to be used by all the Israelites to testify about the great miracle for years to come (4:19-24). The priests were to do so along with everyone else (C-6).

### So what?

None of the priests are named. Perhaps there were too many of them to mention. More likely, naming some would have drawn attention away from the great miracle and the fact that the God of all the earth was with Israel (D-1, D-5). It is far more important to know that the waters were cut off than to know the names of the first two priests to step into Jordan.

There may have been a huge landslide far upstream (3:16) which blocked the flow for many hours. Even if that was involved, however, the Lord was in charge and the perfect timing of everything points to the living God (3:10). As with the crossing of the Red Sea, it is a grave mistake to try to explain the miracle as just the result of a natural phenomenon. The stress is on what God did (A-2).

It is also a serious mistake to primarily focus on the nation-verses-nation fighting in Joshua, rather than on God. As Joshua said at the end, it was the Lord himself who had fought against the Canaanites (23:3). Moreover, it is no accident that the fighting does not begin until chapter six and is rarely mentioned after chapter 13.

Finally, the priests, some of whom probably were low-ranking Levites (3:3, A-6), show that God uses the lowly to glorify himself (1 Cor. 1:26-31). The priests were part of the Lord's great program for Israel (D-6). God also has a great plan for believers today. (See John 14:12.)

### applications

*Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most useful.*

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