

Chapter 3 of Joshua describes the miraculous way that Israel crossed the Jordan river to enter the land of Canaan. The crossing of the Jordan was similar to the way the LORD had brought Israel across the Red Sea some 40 years prior and demonstrated to Israel the power of their God (v. 10). The miraculous nature of these crossings would also give Israel a reputation that served to intimidate the nations that they would come against (Joshua 2:9-10; 5:1).

Joshua 2: Joshua sent two spies to Jericho on a reconnaissance mission, something that apparently happened before Joshua commanded Israel to prepare to cross Jordan in three days (Josh 1:11). While in Jericho, the men meet Rahab the harlot and promised to spare the lives of her and her family as a reward for her protection from the authorities of the city.

1 And Joshua rose early in the morning; and they removed from Shittim, and came to Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they passed over.

The LORD had commanded Joshua to take the people across Jordan into the land of Canaan (Josh. 1:2). Joshua responded by giving the people three days to prepare to cross the Jordan (Josh. 1:11). Apparently the next day after giving that command, Joshua has the people move the camp to the edge of Jordan river in order to spend the three days of preparation there.

2 And it came to pass after three days, that the officers went through the host; 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.

“And it came to pass after three days, that the officers went through the host; And they commanded the people” – At the end of the three days, Joshua sent the officers of the people throughout the camp to instruct the people on how the crossing would proceed.

“saying, When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it” – The ark of the covenant represented the presence of the LORD because He resided on the mercy seat atop the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:21-22). By Joshua’s command, the priests would carry the ark, which was to be the focus of the people’s attention to give them guidance of when and where they were to go.

“then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it” – When the people saw the priests carrying the ark toward the Jordan river, then they were to pack up and follow it.

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.

“Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it” – A cubit is about 18 inches and so 2,000 cubits would be about 3,000 feet. The children of Israel were not to approach the ark any closer than this gap of 3,000 feet between them and the ark. There may have been other reasons for this gap, such as to prevent anyone except the priests from getting too close to the ark and dying because they had violated the holiness of the LORD. However, the next line gives a practical reason for the size of the gap.

“that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed *this way* heretofore” – The children of Israel must have numbered in the millions by now and such a large mass of people would need a large gap so that all could see the ark and where it was going. Joshua did not want the people wandering around themselves looking for a way across the Jordan. Apparently the LORD had already told Joshua how they were to cross the Jordan and so the people needed to cross as a group rather than a haphazard mob attempting to cross a river. They needed to follow the LORD in order to cross at the proper place and in the proper manner so that Israel could witness the LORD’s power and know that He would be faithful to help them take the land (v. 10, Josh. 4:23-24).

5 And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for to morrow the LORD will do wonders among you.

The people were to dedicate themselves to the LORD in preparation for the crossing the next day. They needed to sanctify themselves because of the upcoming miracle that the LORD would do in order to accomplish the crossing. The LORD might delay the miracle and/or punish them if they were not properly prepared. They would also need the LORD’s help to cross safely.

Verses 6-13: The next day, Joshua commands the priests to carry the ark and position themselves in front of the people. Joshua then addresses the people and declares that they can be certain that the LORD will be faithful to enable them to take the land because of the demonstration of His power they would witness.

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;

“And it came to pass” – Verses 14-16 are one long sentence describing the series of events that happened when Israel crossed the Jordan. “It came to pass” is basically saying “this is the way it happened...”

“when the people removed from their tents, to pass over Jordan” – As Joshua had commanded, the people “removed from their tents” (i.e. they vacated and took down their tents) and prepared to cross the Jordan river.

“and the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people” – The priests did as they were commanded by the LORD. They carried the ark of the covenant in front of the people so that the people could follow them across the Jordan.

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,)

“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” – The priests carried the ark to the river and had just gotten their feet wet as they stepped into the edge of the river.

“(for Jordan overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest)” – This was not the dry season when the Jordan river was at its shallowest. Rather, the river had swollen due to the rainy season and the melting of the snows from the nearby mountaintops. The LORD obviously chose the time of year when the river was the most dangerous to cross in order to demonstrate His miraculous power. These priests had to trust the LORD that they would not drown and the ark sink into the depths without them alive to carry it.

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.

“That the waters which came down from above” – The waters “from above” (upstream) flowing down the Jordan toward the place where Israel was crossing. The Jordan flows from north to south into the Dead Sea.

“stood *and* rose up upon an heap very far from the city Adam, that *is* beside Zaretan” – The exact location of the city Adam is unknown. Some commentators place it some 15 miles north of the crossing, while others place it around 30 miles north. Perhaps “very far” is even farther north of Adam or maybe between Adam and the crossing. The LORD supernaturally dammed up the river at that location in order to prevent the water from flowing down to where Israel was crossing.

“and those that came down toward the sea of the plain, *even* the salt sea, failed, *and* were cut off” – This likely refers to the tributaries that flowed into the Jordan toward the “salt sea” (the Dead Sea) that the LORD also cut off so that there would be no water flowing where Israel was crossing the Jordan.

“and the people passed over right against Jericho” – Jericho was on the opposite side of Jordan and apparently the location that the LORD chose to have Israel cross was near that city so that Israel could march toward it after crossing the river.

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.

“And the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of Jordan” – The priests carrying the ark did not immediately go to the other side of the river. They remained in the middle of the Jordan river bed until all of the people had crossed to the other side. The Hebrew word translated “dry ground” is used elsewhere in the OT to refer to ground that is not underwater in contrast to ground that is under a body of water. For instance, this is how the Hebrew word is used in **Haggai 2:6** “*For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land.*” The LORD is quite capable of miraculously drying out the river bed so that the people would not be treading on muddy ground, but the Hebrew word does not seem to necessarily refer to land without moisture.

“and all the Israelites passed over on dry ground, until all the people were passed clean [completely] over Jordan” – The people also walked on “dry ground” until all had stepped out of the river bed on the other side. Once the people had all crossed over, the LORD had Joshua command the priests carrying the ark to come out of the Jordan. The moment they did, the waters began flowing normally again. **Joshua 4:15-18** “*And the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying, Command the priests that bear the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of Jordan. Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, Come ye up out of Jordan. 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.*”