

land of promise is liquid in nature. Perhaps this is appropriate. After all, leaving Egypt could not be accomplished until another body of water, the Red Sea, was opened and traversed. It is almost as if the story of the wilderness wanderings is written on a dry parchment with a soggy margin. As will be seen, the armies of the enemy watch in fear from beyond this liquid frame on either side. Egypt returns home to lick its wounds; Canaan braces for the incoming surge.

Within the text of Joshua, the importance of the Jordan crossing is enormous. Two whole chapters are devoted to its telling. Barking orders fill the page as preparations are made (3:1-13), the crossing is initiated, and a miracle occurs (3:14-17). In the chapter that follows, the crossing concludes with the building of two monuments. The first serves to memorialize the event (4:1-8, 19-24), while the second serves to emphasize Joshua's leadership (4:9). Through this telling and retelling, crossing and recrossing, Yahweh is shown to be a mighty God who advances before his own, Joshua is exalted as Moses' successor, and the people appear as faithful followers.⁴ Released in context, the crossing may even become paradigmatic for the larger preachment of the book. God leads. His people follow and obey, even into the torrent. This is what success looks like in a great commission enterprise.

SUPPLEMENTAL STUDY

HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR A LOW RIVER

*On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.
I am bound for the promised land,
I am bound for the promised land;
O who will come an go with me?
I am bound for the promised land.*

—American Folk Hymn (Public Domain)

⁴John A. Beck argues for the same purpose in his article, "Why Do Joshua's Readers Keep Crossing the River? The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Joshua 3-4," *JETS* 48 (Dec. 2005): 689-699.

Crossing the Jordan River is a persistent theme in Christian hymnody. Songs express the desire to see, experience, or meet someone on the far side of its banks. By means of such cherished expressions, the Jordan has become a powerful metaphor for the boundary between the sorrows of this world and the comfort of a world to come. In the language of hope, the “Promised Land” has become a code word for heaven and crossing the Jordan marks the final leg of that journey. Armed with these expectations, travelers who experience the watercourse that provides the inspiration of this image, unfortunately, may be disappointed. The “great divide” is not what it used to be, or, at the very least, it is far less impressive than the lyrics of old songs such as “Roll, Jordan, Roll” might suggest.

Some of this disappointment may come as a result of the “crossing” environment. Today, the Jordan River runs down a political boundary line between the modern state of Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. For this reason, both banks exhibit all the fearful trappings of security in the Middle East.⁵ While recent improvements in the relations between these sovereigns have made the “crossing zone” less tense, approaching the Jordan inevitably means approaching barbed wire, minefields, checkpoints, vehicle searches, and gun emplacements. These high-security measures may detract from the spiritual appreciation of crossing the Jordan.⁶

Beyond this military threat is the hostility of the land itself. This is particularly true below the confluence of the Wadi Zerqa (Jabbok) and the Jordan. In this southernmost third of the valley, the rain-shadow created by the Judean Hills to the west deprives the region of precipitation. The Rift floor drops to more than a thousand feet below sea level and widens to more than ten miles across. The broken walls on either side of the valley tumble down upon crusty flats

⁵An exception to this rule is the area between the southern end of the Sea of Galilee and the mouth of the Yarmuk River. Because of the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, this short stretch of the Jordan is controlled by the State of Israel on both banks. Not surprisingly, entrepreneurs seeking to profit from the Christian impulse for baptism have built a facility there (Yardenit) to accommodate those willing to pay for access to the water.

⁶The opening of a park connected with “Bethany beyond the Jordan,” near the Wadi al-Kharrar, offers the best opportunity to approach the river from the Jordanian side. Many future tourists will undoubtedly reward the development of this area with their business.

of lime, salt, and clay, the remains of a prehistoric lake.⁷ These soft sediments are, in turn, erosively carved into eerie shapes. Treeless terraces, buttes, and mesas rise and crumble, forming an exhausting barrier to even the most intrepid explorer. In the center of this ash-gray badland coils the Jordan river itself, a muddied line of water banked by thickets of thirsty vegetation. A watercourse here seems so out of place; it surely must be imported from fairer regions.

A third cause for modern disappointment is the size of the Jordan River itself. Because water is so precious in this part of the world, runoff from the hills on either side of the valley is strategically captured and diverted for agricultural use. While these controls are critical for maintaining life in the land (evident by the bold green squares of drip-irrigated fields in the distance), they impact the size and vigor of both the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.⁸ A quick glance from the bus window while crossing the King Hussein (or Allenby) Bridge near Jericho may be the sum of the visual experience; one blink and the pilgrim may miss the Jordan channel altogether. It is more like a creek than a river. In the dry summer months, it might measure ten feet across and be no deeper than two or three feet.

To obtain a view unobscured by these developments, one must slip away to another time and investigate the writing of premodern travelers. Three quotes are offered here. This first is from the pen of George Adam Smith. *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* was based upon four journeys through the land between 1880 and 1904. Smith offers one impression of the Jordan.

The river itself is from 90 to 100 feet broad, a rapid, muddy water with a zigzag current. The depth varies from 3 feet at some fords to as much as 10 or 12. In the sixty-five miles the

⁷Efraim Orni and Elisha Efrat, *Geography of Israel*, 4th rev. ed. (Jerusalem: Israel Universities, 1980), p. 97.

⁸Reports on the diminishing of these waterways are common. With respect to the Dead Sea, it has been suggested that the surface has fallen by twelve meters in elevation since 1900 (Jerome Murphy O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide from Earliest Times to 1700*, 4th ed. [Oxford: Oxford University, 1998], p. 226). Indirect evidence of this depletion may also be sensed by those who maintain walkways for swimmers and tourists. Sidewalks must be regularly lengthened to extend their reach to the water's edge.

descent is 610 feet, or an average of 9 feet a mile. . . . The swift-ness is rendered more dangerous by the muddy bed and curious zigzag current which will easily sweep a man from the side into the centre of the stream. In April the waters rise to the wider bed, but for the most of the year they keep to the channel of 90 feet. Here, with infrequent interruptions of shingle, mostly silent and black in spite of its speed, but now and then breaking into praise and whitening into foam, Jordan scours along, muddy between banks of mud, careless of beauty, careless of life, intent upon its own work, which for ages by decree of the Almighty has been that of separation.⁹

In Carl Ritter's classic *The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula*, a second testimony is discovered:

In proportion to the difficulty in crossing the Jordan in the winter time, when it is almost impossible for any but the Beduins to pass from bank to bank, is the ease of crossing in the summer time, when it may be passed in countless places. Above Beisan these are very numerous; below they are less frequent, and yet the Arabs appear to cross with their flocks and herds, judging from the fact that they are found as often on the west as on the east bank of the river. In July, when Burckhardt passed over the Jordan at Sukkat, where it was eight paces wide, it was only three feet deep. When Irby and Mangles crossed at the same ford, on the 13th of March, it was about a hundred and forty feet wide; the water ran with much force, and reached up to the girth of the horses. When, twelve days later, they crossed by a ford yet more to the south, which they erroneously considered to be that of Gilgal, the Jordan was to their amazement so swollen, that the horses only reached the other side by swimming, and all the goods were wet through. Buckingham and Banks found a ford two hours north of Jericho, and near the Wadi Faisail, where the breadth of the stream on the 29th of January was twenty-five yards.¹⁰

Third and finally, the testimony of J.W. McGarvey may be considered.

⁹G.A. Smith, *Historical Geography*, p. 313.

¹⁰Carl Ritter, *The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula* (New York: Appleton, 1866), pp. 50-51.

We cross by a ford almost due east from Elisha's Fountain called *Gharanizeh*, and sometimes the Jericho ford. . . . A ferryboat is kept in readiness, and must be used during a large part of the year, but just below the ferry-crossing the water breaks over a shoal, and at the head of this it can be forded when it is very deep above. The author's party forded here on the 5th of May, 1879, the water coming about half-way up our saddle-skirt.¹¹

Observations from these three hands help the reader with high expectations for a low river.

1. The People, the Priests, and Joshua Prepare (3:1-14)

¹Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over. ²After three days the officers went throughout the camp, ³giving orders to the people: "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. ⁴Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about a thousand yards^a between you and the ark; do not go near it."

⁵Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you."

⁶Joshua said to the priests, "Take up the ark of the covenant and pass on ahead of the people." So they took it up and went ahead of them.

⁷And the LORD said to Joshua, "Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel, so they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. ⁸Tell the priests who carry the ark of the covenant: 'When you reach the edge of the Jordan's waters, go and stand in the river.'"

⁹Joshua said to the Israelites, "Come here and listen to the words of the LORD your God. ¹⁰This is how you will know that the

¹¹J.W. McGarvey, *Lands of the Bible: A Geographical and Topographical Description of Palestine with Letters of Travel in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and Greece* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott, 1880), pp. 345-346.