

## Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

*Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth:* Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

*Redemption Remembered & Applied* – Last week we witnessed the divine appointment of Joshua to the position of leader of the people of God. We saw the miraculous: God causing the waters of the Jordan to part enabling the covenant community access to the other side. The question has been asked regarding the depth of the Jordan River at the time of their crossing. Certainly, using the modern-day river levels as an indication, it would seem no significant feat to cross even during a time of crest. However, one thing to bear in mind is that both the modern state of Israel as well as the state of Jordan are using the waters of the Jordan as irrigation for crops, so the level of the river today is not an accurate indication of the level of the river in antiquity. How deep was the water of the Jordan at the time of Israel's crossing?

Using biblical and extra-biblical evidence, we know that it was deep enough to make fertile an entire valley. Genesis 13:10 reveals that, "...all the plain of Jordan was well watered everywhere before the Lord destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah". For this to have been the case, the river (even four hundred years later) would be a significant source of water for the surrounding inhabitants, suggesting a more sizable body of water, than the simple creek it is portrayed as today. Furthermore, Josephus, the Jewish historian that wrote nearly fifteen hundred years after the event said this regarding the Jordan: "...Joshua, the commander, was in fear about their passing over Jordan, for the river ran with a strong current, and could not be passed over with bridges, for their never had been bridges laid over it hitherto..." (Josephus Book 5, Chapter 1, Section 3). Although it may be impossible to say with certainty the exact depth of the Jordan at the time of Israel's crossing, we do have historical evidence to believe their crossing to have been nothing short of miraculous. This is supported by the fact that the hearts of the surrounding inhabitants "melted" when they heard Israel had made it across (5:1), something that would not have happened if the river had been shallow enough to wade across.

Today, we will return to the events surrounding the crossing of the Jordan as well as the peculiar events that occurred immediately following the crossing. A new era began with the leadership of Joshua, new not in substance, but in administration. This era would endure until the death of Joshua's generation and would set the stage for the period of the Judges that would soon follow.

Part One: The Great Exchange – Something rather peculiar, and easily overlooked occurs when Joshua instructs Israel to cross the Jordan. In Joshua 3:12, God instructs Joshua to take twelve men, each a representative for their tribe. We would later see that these men would be responsible for taking a rock from the middle of the Jordan and using these rocks to build an altar of memorial once the crossing was complete (4:3). However, they were also instructed to take twelve stones from the other side of Jordan and erect a similar altar of memorial in the midst of the Jordan (4:9). This peculiar transaction seems laden with meaning that we will later explore in detail. However, before we do, let us consider the reason given within the text for erecting such an edifice. According to 4:6-7, "That this may be a sign among you, that when your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, 'What mean ye by these

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*stones?’ Then you shall answer them, ‘That the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it passed over Jordan, the waters of Jordan were cut off: and these stones shall be a memorial unto the children of Israel forever.’* There are two comments that should be made about the reason for erecting the altar of remembrance given in the passage.

- 1) The language used to describe the reason for the construction of the altar is sacramental language. In other words, the phrase, “...when your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, ‘What mean ye by these stones?’” This language is identical to the reason that Israel was instructed to observe the Passover. In Ex. 12:26-27 when describing the Passover, we read, “And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, ‘What mean ye by this service?’ That you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses...”
- 2) The waters were here explained as being cut off from before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, when it passed over Jordan. This is interesting language to use in light of the fact that the ark did not pass over alone, but was accompanied by the people of Israel, the people of the covenant. Here we see the symbol of God’s presence as well as his covenant to be among his people as the given reason for the parting of the waters. God is a God of covenant and is only obligated covenantally to the preservation of his elect. Of course, the basis of this covenantal election is love, demonstrated through God’s free grace.

So, what is going on here? How should we approach this peculiar chain of events: the taking and giving of the stones? There is the obvious reason given in the text, but since the reason given references a sign of a redemptive, historical event we can probe deeper. Remember, that crossing the River Jordan was for the generation of conquest what crossing the Red Sea was for the exodus generation. Paul says this about such an event: “For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...” (1 Corinthians 10:1-2). In other words, Moses, being the mediator of the Mosaic covenant, was the representative of the people to God, and of God to the people. They were baptized (engrafted or joined) to Moses and therefore to God through the cloud (the visible, tangible sign of God’s presence) by means of their passage through the Red Sea. There is a sense in which both the crossing of the Red Sea as well as the crossing of the Jordan, were signs of a redemptive historical work on the part of God for his Covenant people. In light of this, the stones taken from dry land and placed in the midst of the Jordan as well as the stones taken from the midst of the Jordan and placed at Gilgal, can be a sign of the exchange that took place making possible Israel’s redemption. This exchange, as we will see below, gave the community of faith a new identity.

Part Two: Redemption Applied – The text states that once Israel crossed the Jordan they camped that evening in Gilgal (4:19). We are uncertain the name of the place prior to this event, what we do know is that the name of their camp derived from the events that happened there. We have already seen the sacramental occurrence of removal of stones from land and from the river bed from which an altar of remembrance was built. We now move on to study an event, commanded by God, which would have been questionable to any human military leader. After the entire congregation of the children of Israel crossed the Jordan, and after the Jordan returned to its unsurpassable state of seasonal crest, God told Joshua, “...make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel the second time” (5:2). Remember that circumcision was a sign of the covenant given to Abraham and his descendants as an outward Baney, Lesson 2 Winter/Spring 2016

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identification with the promises of God. As such, it is a means of grace given to the OT church, a physical, outward mark separating the covenant community from the rest of mankind. Here, within the shadow of Jericho, God commanded Joshua to practically disable all his prime fighting men. To obey, would have required an immense amount of faith in God and his protection. The reason God made such an instruction was because all male children born during the forty year sojourn in the wilderness had not been circumcised. For these individuals, the “reproach” of Egypt still lingered. By circumcising them at this time they were justly made members of the covenant community pursuant to the sign of the covenant given to Abraham, and lost the reproach - the lingering curse - of their enslavement in Egypt. According to Francis Schaeffer in his book, *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History*, “The reason Joshua’s act was so crucial was before the Israelites began their battles, every man was to have upon his body the mark of the Abrahamic covenant.”<sup>1</sup>

However, there is a sense in which a new identity is here being given to the people of God, the identity that was promised the night God rescued his people from Egypt. The people of promise had entered the land of promise, but did not identify with the promise (as covenantally required) because of their parent’s inability to embrace the promise. This is ultimately the “reproach” that we witness being reversed. It is associated with Egypt because Egypt was the land of enslavement whose inhabitants pursued after the community of faith even after their own sons paid the price of redemption. It is not that the generation born in the wilderness were not members of the covenant community (at least they were members of the community sanctioned under the Mosaic covenant), but there was a need for identification with the Abrahamic covenant since the element of possessing the land (the effort to which they were about to embark) was tied to the three-fold promises contained in the Abrahamic covenant.

According to the NT writers, there is a correlation between circumcision and baptism. Colossians 2:11-12 states, “*In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been raised with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.*” In this passage, the correlation between circumcision and baptism is undeniable. When one considers what use the writers of the NT made of both the crossing of the Red Sea as well as the act of circumcision, we see in both sacramental acts, redemption remembered and applied. It is telling that four days later (after the mass circumcision and the crossing of the Jordan) Israel observes the Passover. “*While the people were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, on the plains of Jericho*” (5:10). The day after Passover, the manna ceased to fall. This bread had sustained them throughout their wilderness wandering; now, they ate the food of the Land of Promise.

Part Three: The Commander of the Army of the Lord – It goes without saying that Joshua was not a King, nor was he ever intended to be a king. However, it would have been an anomaly among armies within the ancient near east, not to be under the leadership of a king. Israel was different from all the nations of the earth. They were destined to be a Theocracy, not a Monarchy. When Moses blessed the people of Israel before his death atop Mt. Pisgah, he declared, “*...The Lord became king in Jeshurun (Israel), when the heads of the people were gathered, and the tribes of Israel together...*” (Deut. 33:5). The gathering of the tribes mentioned here references the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. In a very real sense, the Mosaic covenant and the ensuing law established God as king over his people, and he would reign in justice

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<sup>1</sup> Schaeffer, Francis *Joshua and the Flow of Biblical History* pg. 99  
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over them. Although they were not forbidden to have an earthly king, they were instructed to support only the man of God's choosing. This man would be obligated to study the Law of God and essentially serve as an emissary of the divine (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

When Joshua was near Jericho (apparently alone), the Bible offers an account of a confirmation of God's rule over his people. Joshua saw a man standing with sword drawn, but he was incapable of determining whose side the soldier was on. The text reads, *"When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his sword drawn in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, 'Are you for us or for our adversaries?' And he said, 'No, but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.'"* Although it is more than likely God communicated his plan to conquer the city of Jericho at this time, the only thing the text mentions the Commander of God's army as saying is, *"Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy"*. How notable that when Joshua had reason to feel a need to adorn for battle, God instructed him to remove his shoes in the presence of the holy. This lesson served as a reminder to the people of God of who was truly in charge of their armies and would lead them into battle. It was no one less than God himself, God was their true king.

Conclusion: As we continue our journey through this new era in the story of God's redemptive work in history, we are provoked by the familiar as well as the unfamiliar. For instance, it should be no surprise that God would seek to renew the relationship between himself and the chosen community prior to embarking on such a mission as the conquest of Canaan. Throughout our own lives there are moments of spiritual growth and renewal. What may be more puzzling, however, is why God, the savior of Rahab, commanded the utter annihilation of the inhabitants of Canaan. Were they past the point of conversion? Could they have been worse than the Ninevites (notorious for their violence to expectant mothers) upon whom God showed mercy during the ministry of the prophet Jonah? We do not have the full answer to this questions at this time. However, the question of God-sanctioned violence and destruction is one to which we will return in the days ahead.

*Questions:*

- 1) *What is the doctrine of double imputation?*
- 2) *In what way(s) is the "great exchange" mentioned in our lesson similar to the doctrine of double imputation?*
- 3) *What do you think the text means by "rolling away" the reproach of Egypt at the camp of Gilgal?*
- 4) *Has there ever been a time in your life that you failed to acknowledge who was in control?*
- 5) *How did God remind you of his sovereign work in your life during such time(s)?*