



The conquest of Canaan according to the book of Joshua

days later, the officials went through the camp<sup>3</sup> and charged the people as follows: "When you see the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD your God being borne by the levitical priests, you shall move forward. Follow it—<sup>4</sup>but keep a distance of some two thousand cubits from it, never coming any closer to it—so that you may know by what route to march, since it is a road you have not traveled before."<sup>5</sup> And Joshua said to the people, "Purify yourselves,<sup>a</sup> for tomorrow the LORD will perform wonders in your midst."

**6** Then Joshua ordered the priests, "Take up the Ark of the Covenant and advance to the head of the people." And they took up the Ark of the Covenant and marched at the head of the people.

**7** The LORD said to Joshua, "This day, for the first time, I will exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they shall know that I will be with you as I was with Moses."<sup>8</sup> For your part, command the priests who carry the Ark of the Covenant as follows: When you reach the edge of the waters of the Jordan, make a halt in the Jordan."

**9** And Joshua said to the Israelites, "Come closer and listen to the words of the LORD your God."<sup>10</sup> By this," Joshua continued, "you shall know that a living God is among you, and that He will dispossess for you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites:<sup>11</sup> the Ark of the Covenant of the Sovereign of all the earth is advancing before you into the Jordan."<sup>12</sup> Now select twelve men from the tribes of Israel, one man from each tribe.<sup>13</sup> When the feet of the priests bearing the Ark of the LORD, the Sovereign of all the earth, come to rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan—the water coming from upstream—will be cut off and will stand in a single heap."

**14** When the people set out from their encampment to cross the Jordan, the priests bearing the Ark of the Cove-

*the Covenant served as a container for the Book of Teaching according to Deut. 31.26. As the potent physical symbol of God's presence among the people, it could be protective in battle (see Num. 10.33-35; 1 Sam. 4.3-5). The levitical priests, as bearers of the Ark, may have been a militant group in early Israel (cf. Gen. 49.5-7). 4: Two thousand cubits, about 1,000 m (.625 mile) was the distance needed to separate the people from the powerful sanctity of the Ark. 5: Purify yourselves connotes ritual sanctity, befitting God's presence. The preparations are faintly reminiscent of the preparations for the revelation at Sinai (Exod. 19.9-15).*

**7:** The statement *the LORD said to Joshua* occurs repeatedly in chs 1-6, indicating that Joshua fully succeeds Moses; and *I will be with you* resumes the promise of the commission in 1.5. **8:** The priests halt in the Jordan; this image recurs in vv. 13, 15, 17 and in 4.9-10.

**10:** *A living God* is archaic language, perhaps drawn from the identification of the LORD with the Canaanite deity El. It expresses the vitality of God. *Canaanites . . . Jebusites* is a stereotyped listing of the existing population of the land. Similar lists, with varying components, appear frequently in the Bible, often totaling seven groups, thereby signaling the totality of non-Israelite groups (because seven is a symbolic number, representing completeness). Not all of these names can be identified, but the plurality of groups itself may indicate ethnic diversity in the population of Canaan.

**12:** *Twelve men* indicates the tribal components of the unified group—all Israel—that figures prominently in Joshua; it anticipates the ceremonial acts of 4.1-9, 20. **13:** *Stand*, in reference to the miraculous piling up of water, is also used for the miraculous halt of the sun's course in 10.13. *Heap* is an unusual term, used elsewhere in the Bible only in references to the parting of the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 15.8; cf. Ps. 78.13). The crossing of the Jordan is thus made parallel to the crossing of the Sea

8.10. It serves as a formula proclaiming that Joshua is carrying out God's instructions. *The Jordan* symbolizes all the borders of the promised land, and crossing a river into Israel's territory echoes the people's passage through water (the Reed Sea) under the leadership of Moses at the outset of the journey. This strengthens the depiction of Joshua as a new Moses, with great authority.

**2:** Connects with 1.11. **3:** *The Ark of*

<sup>a</sup> See Exod. 19.10, 15.

using different sources and being unwilling to eliminate repetitive components.

**3.1-17: The Ark and the people cross.** The first description of the crossing introduces the religious aspects of the event, represented by the actions of the priests as bearers of the Ark of the Covenant.

**1:** *Early next morning*, a phrase meaning that diligent activity is about to begin, recurs at 6.12; 7.16;

nant were at the head of the people. <sup>15</sup>Now the Jordan keeps flowing over its entire bed throughout the harvest season. But as soon as the bearers of the Ark reached the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the Ark dipped into the water at its edge, <sup>16</sup>the waters coming down from upstream piled up in a single heap a great way off, at Adam, the town next to Zarethan; and those flowing away downstream to the Sea of the Arabah (the Dead Sea) ran out completely. So the people crossed near Jericho. <sup>17</sup>The priests who bore the Ark of the LORD's Covenant stood on dry land exactly in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel crossed over on dry land, until the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan.

**4** When the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, <sup>2</sup>"Select twelve men from among the people, one from each tribe, <sup>3</sup>and instruct them as follows: Pick up twelve stones from the spot exactly in the middle of the Jordan, where the priests' feet are standing; take them along with you and deposit them in the place where you will spend the night."

<sup>4</sup>Joshua summoned the twelve men whom he had designated among the Israelites, one from each tribe; <sup>5</sup>and Joshua said to them, "Walk up to the Ark of the LORD your God, in the middle of the Jordan, and each of you lift a stone onto his shoulder—corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel. <sup>6</sup>This shall serve as a symbol among you: in time to come, when your children ask, 'What is the meaning of these stones for you?' <sup>7</sup>you shall tell them, 'The waters of the Jordan were cut off because of the Ark of the LORD's Covenant; when it passed through the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off.' And so these stones shall serve the people of Israel as a memorial for all time."

<sup>8</sup>The Israelites did as Joshua ordered. They picked up twelve stones, corresponding to the number of the tribes of Israel, from the middle of the Jordan—as the LORD had charged Joshua—and they took them along with them to their night encampment and deposited them there.

<sup>9</sup>Joshua also set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, at the spot where the feet of the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant had stood; and they have remained there to this day.

<sup>10</sup>The priests who bore the Ark remained standing in the middle of the Jordan until all the instructions that the LORD had ordered Joshua to convey to the people had

of Reeds; cf. Ps. 114.3. **15:** *Harvest season* refers to early summer, when the waters are still high, making the halt in the Jordan's flow all the more wondrous. In antiquity, as in modern times, the depth of the Jordan varied greatly, reaching a low point after the hot, rainless summer. **16:** *Adam* and *Zarethan* are two cities east of the Jordan, probably north of the crossing to Jericho. Because they cannot be securely identified with existing sites, their distance from each other is not known. *Crossed* is used several times in close succession: in vv. 16-17 and in 4.1, 9, 11, 13, 22, 23. This repetition, like the frequent mention of the Jordan, signals the importance of the movement of all Israel across the boundary of their territory.

#### 4.1-9: The twelve stone tradition.

The placing of the twelve stones as memorials is the focus of this unit, which contains language similar to that of the preceding and following units. **3:** The twelve stones are reminiscent of the twelve pillars representing the tribes of Israel in Exod. 24.4. The placing of large stones was a commemorative act (see also 24.27). **6-7:** The questions and answers about the meaning of the stones, as a way of recalling a significant event, is characteristic of the didactic style of Deuteronomy (see Deut. 6.20-24) and also of Joshua. **9:** A somewhat different tradition here has Joshua himself setting up stones, perhaps to connect him with Moses, the one who erects pillars in Exod. ch. 24. Joshua does this in the riverbed, whereas the twelve men carry stones to Gilgal (v. 20). *To this day* is an etiological formula, namely part of a story that describes the origin of a particular place, person, or institution. The concluding formula does not quite make sense here because rocks in the middle of a river would not likely be visible.

**4.10-14:** *The people cross.* The crossing of the Jordan is reiterated with a strong emphasis on the connection of this event, led by Joshua, with Moses and the ex-

<sup>a</sup> So kethib; qere "from."

