

JOSHUA

CHAPTER 4

Twelve Memorial Stones from the Jordan

When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the LORD said to Joshua, 2 “Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, 3 and command them, saying, ‘Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priests’ feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you and lay them down in the place where you lodge tonight.’” 4 Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. 5 And Joshua said to them, “Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, 6 that this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ 7 then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.” 8 And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the LORD told Joshua. And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged and laid them down there. 9 And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there to this day. 10 For the priests bearing the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. The people passed over in haste. 11 And when all the people had finished passing over, the ark of the LORD and the priests passed over before the people. 12 The sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh passed over armed before the people of Israel, as Moses had told them. 13 About 40,000 ready for war passed over before the LORD for battle, to the plains of Jericho. 14 On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him just as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life. 15 And the LORD said to Joshua, 16 “Command the priests bearing the ark of the testimony to come up out of the Jordan.” 17 So Joshua commanded the priests, “Come up out of the Jordan.” 18 And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the LORD came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests’ feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before. 19 The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. 20 And those twelve stones, which they took out of the Jordan, Joshua set up at Gilgal. 21 And he said to the people of Israel, “When your children ask their fathers in times to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ 22 then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ 23 For the LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, 24 so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the LORD is mighty, that you may fear the LORD your God forever.”

4:1 Nation has crossed, but priests with the ark hold their position in the middle of the dry riverbed (vv 10, 16). (CC)

The LORD’s command to Joshua that now sets the action in motion centers on building a twelve-stone memorial to commemorate the dry-crossing miracle. (CC)

As 4:1 begins, the whole nation has finished crossing the Jordan, but the ark and the priests carrying it are still standing in the middle of the dry riverbed. The LORD's command in 4:2 may be a repetition of the command in 3:12, since the substance of the two is the same. In 3:12 Joshua spoke the command to choose twelve men, but he did not at that point reveal their function (nor does 4:2). The author thereby aroused the reader's curiosity. We readers have hoped he would return to the point. We are not disappointed as now in 4:3 he spells out their task through the LORD's own words to Joshua. (CC)

4:2 In 3:12, Joshua commanded that 12 men be chosen. Now their task is made known. (CC)

A man from each of the twelve tribes of Israel is to pick up a stone from the exact place where the ark-bearing priests are standing in the middle of the Jordan and carry it to the place where Israel will stay that night. The LORD is involving each tribe through its representative. One of the book's themes, namely, that Israel is one body of believers, thus comes from the LORD's own mouth here. Probably the Levites are exempted from the stone-carrying because the priests, who are Levites, have carried the ark. In that case, the two tribes descended from Joseph, namely, Ephraim and Manasseh, bring the number to twelve. The less likely alternative is that a representative of the Levites participates, and then Ephraim and Manasseh would be represented by only one man. (CC)

The LORD's words "from here—from the middle of the Jordan, from the place of the standing of the feet of the priests" seem to call attention to the fact that the LORD is speaking from his location at the ark of the covenant, which is now in "the middle of the Jordan" (4:2). By means of the LORD's presence at the ark he is right in the thick of things, holding back the waters and protecting his people at the point of greatest danger. (CC)

Christians may be reminded here of the teaching and miracles of Jesus as he worked in the middle of danger for the safety of his people. Recall, for example, his miracle over wind and waves while in the boat with his disciples, his rescue of the woman caught in adultery just before the stones were to fly, and his protecting the disciples at Gethsemane. His greatest act was to go to the cross, where he suffered the ultimate punishment of death in our place to atone for the sins of the whole world, and then he rose from the tomb. (CC)

God is not a distant being. He is fulfilling one of the aims of his miracle expressed through Joshua in 3:10: "By this you will know that the living Mighty One is in your midst." The people can see with their eyes the effect of his presence among them and know it from experience. Likewise future generations will see with their eyes the stones from that very site, remember, learn what their parents experienced, and know again of the Lord's continuing presence right among his people. (CC)

Stone memorials to acts of God are found elsewhere in the OT. See, for example, Gen 28:18; 35:14, 20. The LORD commanded other fascinating memory prods and teaching aids for his covenant people, such as tassels for the corners of their garments (Num 15:37–41). Visible reminders of God's commands, promises, and acts can serve a valuable purpose for his often forgetful people, as his own directions show (see further the commentary on Josh 4:4–7). (CC)

4:3 *out of the midst of the Jordan.* Priests with the ark are still in the riverbed. (TLSB))

at the place where you lodge tonight. Indicating that the entire nation made the crossing in one day. (CSB)

Implies that the Lord is speaking from His location at the Ark of the Covenant. He is in the thick of things, holding back the waters and protecting His people. (TLSB)

4:5–7 Memorials in stone were common in OT Israel. Jacob (“Israel”) on four occasions set up stones after a significant event in his life (Gn 28:18; 31:45; 35:14, 20). In Jsh, there are many different stone memorials (4:1–9, 20–24; 7:25–26; 8:28–32; 10:27; 22:10–34; 24:26–27). (TLSB)

When Joshua relays the LORD’s command, there is some repetition from 4:2–3 as expected and intended. New details also emerge. (CC)

We hear again that a man from each tribe will take part in the special activity. Repeated also is the command that the stones are to be lifted from the middle of the Jordan. Concerning the location, the standing place of the priests marked the spot in 4:3, whereas in 4:5 it is the ark that points to the location. By varying the expression, undue repetition is avoided without creating any contradiction. The stones taken from that precise spot in front of the ark will continue to signify that the LORD himself in association with his ark brought about the miracle. (CC)

4:5 *each of you*. Emphasizes participation of all Israel, a subtheme of Jsh. (TLSB)

4:6 *sign*. “Memorial” (v 7); in the OT, a thing, act, or event that establishes the certainty of a promise or event (e.g., the rainbow is a “sign”; Gn 9:12). (TLSB)

New details about the twelve stones appear in Joshua’s orders here. The stones, whose function was veiled in 4:3, will serve as “a sign” according to 4:6, something that calls attention to what happened here. “Sign” is further defined as “a memorial” in 4:7, so that even in 4:6 we might understand אִיֶּזֶק as “a memorial-sign.” (CC)

children ask. The 12 rocks will serve as an aid for parents to teach their children in catechetical fashion. Cf Ex 12:26; 13:14 for children’s questions. (TLSB)

What do these stones mean? A stone monument was commonly used as a memorial to remind future generations of what had happened at that place (24:26; 1Sa 7:12). (CSB)

While Joshua is speaking to the twelve stone-carriers in 4:5–7, what he says is intended for all Israel now and in the future. The purposefully piled rocks are to serve as a solid springboard for parents to teach their children about the wonderful works of the LORD at the Jordan. Even those too young to read will learn the meaning of this special heap of river rocks as parents take time to satisfy their children’s natural curiosity. The LORD through Joshua is creating a teaching tool that will shout perpetually of his grace as fathers and mothers tell the story. The LORD foresees that children will ask a question about this sign, just as in the Passover celebration the children will ask a question about its significance, giving the parents the opportunity to catechize them in the faith (Ex 12:26; 13:14). (CC)

Parents are to present the account in such a way that their children are not just fascinated by the physical fact of the Jordan’s waters being cut off. They are to know that their covenant LORD did this for the salvation of his dear people. Far beyond mere infatuation with the spectacular, children are to grow in faith in their relationship with their faithful LORD. The stones are thus to be a “memorial” (4:7) in a full sense of the word. This is not accomplished just as these stones stand there by themselves. Rather, their divine function will be fulfilled as present and future parents declare the wonders of God in response to their children’s questions about them. In retelling the story, the faith of the parents too will be built up. (CC)

The miracles of God can be misused, as Jesus shows in Jn 6:26–59, where people were infatuated only with what a miracle could do for their stomachs. In Lk 23:8 Herod Antipas hoped for the entertainment value he would get from a miracle of Jesus. It is possible to focus on the purely physical aspects of

miracles and the excitement they can generate at the expense of their God-intended goals. The LORD will be honored at the Jordan and at worship services as God's people value his miracles for the purpose he wants them to serve. At the Jordan, the LORD intended his miracle to serve the following purposes:

- To exalt Joshua before the Israelites so that they will respect him as leader (3:7; 4:14)
- To show that he is with Joshua as he was with Moses (3:7)
- To assure the Israelites that he is present among them (3:10)
- To demonstrate his resolve to drive out the enemy peoples, whose measure of sin is full and now calls for his judgment (3:10; see the excursus "The Seven Peoples of Canaan")
- To provide a teaching tool for nurturing future generations in the faith (4:6, 21)
- To lead all the peoples of the earth to know his strength to save (4:24)
- To lead people to fear and worship him (4:24) (CC)

4:7 *before*. Or, "because of." (TLSB)

the ark of the covenant of the LORD. Using the full name of the ark emphasizes that the Lord, through the means of His ark, effected the miracle. (CSB)

a memorial forever. The physical stones are not known to us today, but because this account is included in Scripture, the stones continue to be a memorial to the Lord's power and grace. (TLSB)

The monumental deed of "the Rock of Israel" (Gen 49:24) calls for a monument in rock as a memorial. By the inclusion of the account of these stones in Scripture, they continue for all generations to be a perpetual memorial to the power and grace of the LORD. (CC)

These stones and parents' responsibilities concerning them may remind Christians of Jesus' Palm Sunday words: "I tell you if these should be silent, the stones will cry out" (Lk 19:40). God will see to it that he receives praise for his saving acts. His first choice is for praise from the lips of his people. If they are silent, stones might have to do the job. It is better to be like Peter (the "rock") and make a rock-solid confession of the Christ as he did (Mt 16:13–20). (CC)

For God's people in the NT era, it is the Word and Sacraments that memorialize God's accomplished acts of salvation and that inculcate the faith in younger generations. Parents are to teach their children the Scriptures "from infancy," even as Timothy was so taught (2 Tim 3:15). Every time a Baptism takes place in church, it is a golden opportunity for parents to teach their children about the significance of their own children having been baptized into the body of Christ and into the Christian faith. As they teach, the parents too recall their blessings of being a baptized child of God. (CC)

While the Israelites recalled and celebrated their redemption when they saw the stones that served as a "sign" and "memorial" (Josh 4:6–7), NT Christians celebrate their redemption accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ in a memorial meal: the Lord's Supper. When Christ instituted it, he commanded, "This do in my remembrance" (Lk 22:19). The Supper is far more than a pile of stones. It does provide an excellent opportunity to teach children about Christ's passion and atoning death, since it has a kerygmatic purpose: "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26). But it is far more than a teaching tool. In the Supper the communicant receives the true body and blood of Jesus Christ, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins (Lk 22:19–20 and parallels). The memorial meal therefore does far more than simply call to mind Christ's past act of redemption. The worthy communicant (1 Cor 11:27–29) actually receives the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation won by the Lord Jesus on the cross and by way of his empty tomb. The worthy communicant is one who believes the words of Christ, "This is my body, which is given for you" and "This cup is the new

covenant in my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (SC, Sacrament of the Altar, 4, 10). (CC)

4:8 *people of Israel did*. In 4:8 Israel acts precisely in the way the LORD had commanded Joshua in 4:2–3 and Joshua had ordered the people in 4:5. The chain of command and obedience evident in chapter 3 continues, as does the consequent literary pattern (see the commentary on 3:1–6 and 3:7–8). An appointed man from each of the twelve tribes picks up a stone from the spot in the middle of the river where the feet of the priests carrying the ark had rested and deposits the stone at the place they would camp that night. (CC)

These 12 stones become a memorial at Gilgal, as v 20 reveals; different from the 12-stone memorial of v 9. (TLSB)

The information about depositing the stones at the camp may involve prolepsis; it is mentioned here in 4:8 but would not actually have been done until later in the day, after the close of the action narrated in chapters 3–4. It is also possible that the twelve men immediately carried the stones to the campsite and deposited them there, then returned to the river to rejoin the rest of the Israelites. The expression “set them there” (4:8) does not yet speak of creating the memorial. That activity involving these same stones is first described at 4:20. (CC)

The author has not prepared us for what happens in 4:9, and our reaction may initially be perplexity. Joshua sets up a second memorial of twelve stones at the spot in the riverbed where the priests stood with the ark. He may have done this on his own initiative, perhaps in gratitude for the LORD exalting him through the miracle (3:7; 4:14). On the other hand, Joshua may have received a command of the LORD not recorded for us, instructing him to do this. Most likely the location is in the middle of the Jordan, where the priests stood for the duration of Israel’s crossing, and not the point on the east edge of the riverbed where the priests’ feet first touched the water, initiating the miracle. Although the lower levels of this stone heap might always be under water, and all twelve might be submerged during flood-stage weeks, at least the top of this memorial would be high, dry, and visible most of the year. The stones must be rather large. Their unusual mid-river position would catch the eye. (CC)

Some understand 4:9 as saying only that twelve stones (the same ones mentioned in 4:3, 5) were *taken* from the place where the priests stood. However, the Hebrew directs us to understand that twelve stones (which must be different from the ones in 4:3, 5) were *set up* there in the dry riverbed. Joshua constructs a second memorial to the LORD’s amazing act. The author says that *Joshua* set up the twelve stones. Joshua may have done this personally, or the author may credit the action to him by virtue of his leadership even if others were involved in the erection of the heavy rocks that would withstand the current when the waters returned. (CC)

4:9 *Joshua set up the twelve stones*. Each tribe brought a stone for the monument from the riverbed to the new campsite at Gilgal, and Joshua constructed the monument there. An alternative translation suggests that Joshua set up a second pile in the middle of the river. (CSB)

Two memorials with 12 stones each thus commemorate the miracle at the Jordan: one at Gilgal and one in the river itself. (TLSB)

The stones set up by Joshua in the river are there “to this day” (4:9), that is, at the time the author writes this sixth book of the Bible. This phrase, which is common in Joshua, reveals that the book was written sometime later than the time of the events it narrates. Yet the author is presenting historical facts, not mere myths. The first readers of Joshua can see the visible evidence that provides a tangible link to the actual events. The author by this phrase is affirming the same thing as the apostle John: “These words are trustworthy and true” (Rev 21:5). (CC)

in the midst of the Jordan. In the middle of the riverbed. (TLSB)

they are there. The 12 stones are probably large and conspicuous. At least the top of this memorial would be high, dry, and visible most of the year. Their unusual midriver position would catch the eye. (TLSB)

The two stone memorials of Joshua remind us that it is good to *contemplate, celebrate*, and then to *commemorate* the gracious and amazing acts of our Savior-God. Commemoration will in turn lead to more contemplation and celebration of his gracious redemption. For us NT Christians, this takes place especially in worship, when God communicates his forgiveness and salvation to us through his Word and Sacraments in the Divine Service, and we respond joyfully. Objects used in worship or commemoration are, of course, misused when they are credited with inherent value or powers, such as “Nehushtan” in 2 Ki 18:4. Nevertheless, Luther was not like the iconoclastic fanatics who smashed commemorative objects. Stained-glass windows, sculpture, mosaics, paintings, and other kinds of sacred art and church furnishings, as well as Christian jewelry, certificates, plaques, and memorial objects of all kinds, can serve a God-honoring purpose. (CC)

Apart from memorial objects, the very lives of God’s people are memorials that call attention to his grace and power. To those who have come to “the living Stone,” Jesus Christ, Peter says, “You also, *like living stones*, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:4–5). The lives of those “living stones” evoke questions from observers, just as the stones would lead children to ask, “What are these stones for you? (Josh 4:6; cf. 4:21). We are to answer those questions respectfully, gently, and anytime, as Peter exhorts in the chapter that follows his reference to “living stones”: “Always be prepared for [giving] an explanation to anyone who asks you a reason for the hope in you. But [do this] with humility and fear, having a good conscience” (1 Pet 3:15–16). As living stones, Christians are not to be overbearing boulders that roll over people, nor common rocks that blend in with the rest of the landscape of sinful humanity, but holy stones that invite questions about their God-hewn beauty. (CC)

to this day. When Jsh was written. Common phrase in Jsh (5:9; 6:25; 7:26 [twice]; 8:28, 29; 9:27; 10:27; 13:13; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10; 23:8–9) and other biblical books, which accents the historical reality of the events. (TLSB)

4:10 *until ... finished.* Text does not say just how long but there are three indicators of time: the whole nation of hundreds of thousands of people cross while the priests hold the ark; the people pass over “in haste”; and the crossing happens within one day (vv 3, 19). (TLSB)

In Josh 4:10 the author repeats the location of the priests carrying the ark. Because of the repetition, who can forget that the covenant Lord through his ark is in the middle of the miracle? He is causing it to happen, and through his leader he is directing all the activity of his covenant people. If while reading 3:17 and 4:1 we had assumed that the ark-bearing priests had completed the crossing together with the people by this time, that impression is corrected by 4:10. The priests are the first to set foot in the dangerous floodwaters, and they are the last to leave the dry riverbed. They are a model for pastors to lead the procession of the church militant forward, no matter what the danger, and to hold their ground despite the personal risks until the last of God’s people have crossed over to safety. (CC)

The priests have not moved from their mid-river dry ground but are still standing there until all that the LORD had said is completed. The repetition of “all” (כָּל) in 4:10 is striking: “until the completion of *all* the Word that the LORD ordered Joshua to speak to the people, according to *all* that Moses had ordered Joshua.” No detail slips by without attention. Joshua relayed the commands of the LORD in their entirety, and the people obeyed the instructions totally. This emphasizes the efficacy of the Word of God to accomplish *all* that God desires (cf. Is 55:10–11) and that blessings from the LORD accompany wholehearted obedience in faith. (CC)

The expression “according to all that *Moses* had ordered *Joshua*” (Josh 4:10) cannot refer to specific instructions for crossing the Jordan recorded in the Torah of Moses. In the Pentateuch there are no recorded orders from Moses to Joshua relating to details of crossing the river. The clause in 4:10 probably anticipates what 4:12 will describe, namely, that the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh crossed over to fight with their brothers; they will not return to their allotted inheritance east of the Jordan until Canaan is taken. That was part of Moses’ commands to Joshua, as Joshua reminded those tribes in 1:13–15 (see the commentary there). The clause in 4:10 could also refer to the general commands of the LORD through Moses given to Joshua when he was called to lead the people (Num 27:23; Deut 3:28; 31:7–8, 23), or perhaps to a command from Moses to Joshua not recorded in the Torah. (CC)

in haste. Not to suggest a frantic rush for fear that disaster might strike, but rather that there was no delay and no obstacle because of God’s steady, powerful hand holding back the waters. Cf Ex 12:11; Dt 16:3 regarding the Passover meal. (TLSB)

A new detail brought out in Josh 4:10 is that the people “hurried” as they crossed the dry riverbed. There is nothing in this verse or its context to suggest a frantic rush for fear that disaster might soon strike. The hand of the LORD is steady and powerful as he holds back the surging waters for his people. That “the people hurried and they crossed over” (4:10) connotes that their whole activity was without obstacle and without delay. Nothing stood in their way. On their part, there was no dallying. If the people had been lazy or complacent, the priests holding the ark would have had to hold their position for a longer time. Glorifying God for a miracle does not involve putting him to an unnecessary test. Prompt action was necessary for the large nation since the crossing had to be completed in a day and camp had to be set up for lodging on the west bank that night (4:3). The purposeful speed of the people might be compared to the Passover meal, when God instructed the Israelites:

Thus shall you eat it: with your waists girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. You shall eat it in haste; it is the LORD’s Passover. (Ex 12:11; see also Deut 16:3) (CC)

4:11 After the people crossed, the priests with the ark evidently moved from the rear of the people, passed by them, and resumed a leading position. (TLSB)

Finally, when all the people have safely crossed, “the ark of the LORD and the priests” cross over (Josh 4:11). The prominence of the LORD’s ark comes out again in the word order in this verse: “the ark of the LORD” is mentioned first. The expression “and the priests” follows almost as an afterthought. That does not belittle the priests, but again places the LORD and his ark at the center of the drama of salvation. The people, now standing on the west bank of the Jordan, see that the LORD, whose “real presence” is at the ark, is the sole cause of the miracle. They face the LORD’s ark as it passes by them and returns to its location “in front of the people” (4:11) so as to lead them once again. (CC)

4:12–13 *40,000*. About one-third of the total number of armed men for these 2½ tribes, which was 110,580, according to the census of Nu 26. The rest of their troops evidently remained in the Transjordan without compromising the promise of these tribes. Cf 1:12–18. (TLSB)

A new detail that emerges from 4:12–13 is the position of the fighting men of the eastern tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh. In 1:12–18 we saw that these tribes promised to cross the Jordan “in military formations ahead of” their brothers (1:14). The author does not leave a loose thread hanging. Repetition of this phrase now in 4:12 reveals that these two and a half tribes are keeping their word, which merely echoed God’s Word. What the LORD had commanded them through Moses (Num 32:20–22; Deut 3:18–20; 1:13) they are now doing and will continue to do. Their participation here at the crossing is only the beginning of their faithfulness to their word—God’s Word—to help the rest of the nation. In Josh 22:1–6 the leader of the covenant nation will declare to them that they have fulfilled their divine mandate and can return to their inheritance back on the eastern side of the Jordan. (CC)

The LORD is performing his miracle for the entire nation, including the eastern tribes. The reference here to Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh crossing the Jordan thus brings out not only the themes of *obedience* and of the *continuity* of leadership from Moses to Joshua, but also the theme of the *unity of Israel as one body of believers*, part of the *una sancta*—the “one holy Christian and apostolic church” (Nicene Creed) spanning both Testaments. (CC)

The figure of “about forty thousand armed for battle” (4:13) is considerably less than the total number of the armed men of these two and a half tribes listed in the census in Numbers 26. That census gives these figures: 43,730 from Reuben; 40,500 from Gad; and 52,700 from all of Manasseh (so the total for Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh would be 110,580). “About forty thousand” therefore is between one-third and one-half of that total. Evidently the rest of the troops remained in Transjordan to defend the Israelite families there. (CC)

While the land of Canaan is a gift freely given by the LORD, he has chosen to employ the army of his covenant nation as his visible agent of victory. The terms “military formations,” “armed for battle,” and “for the war” (4:12–13) anticipate the coming conquest, as does the name “Jericho” (4:13; see chapter 2). Israel has nothing to fear as it acts in the obedience of faith demonstrated here by its eastern tribes. (CC)

That the eastern tribes “crossed over before the LORD” (4:13 עָבְרוּ לְפָנָי יְהוָה) may refer to their crossing before or in front of *the ark* of the LORD, with which he closely associates himself. Or the clause may involve a pregnant use of לְפָנָי (“before”). Possible meanings would thus be that they crossed “under the LORD’s covenant promises and protection,” “in association with him and his covenant,” or “in covenant obedience to him.” (See the excursus “Covenant.”) We understand the destination of these troops, “the plains of Jericho” (4:13), to be the same as “Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho” (4:19), rather than assuming a separate military venue for this force. (CC)

plains of Jericho. Area north of the Salt Sea that spreads out into a large flat plain on both sides of the Jordan River. West of the river, this plain is called “the plains of Jericho”; east of the river it is called “the plains of Moab” (Nu 22:1). (TLSB)

4:13 *About forty thousand.* Seems too few for the number of men listed in Nu 26 for Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh; the contingents were very likely representative since it would have been imprudent to leave the people undefended who settled in Transjordan (cf. 22:8, “brothers”; Nu 32:17). (CSB)

4:14 Josh 4:14 stands apart from the pattern started at 3:7 of the LORD commanding Joshua, Joshua commanding Israel, and the people’s obedient action. The author himself here departs from the usual structure in chapters 3–4 to shout that the aim to be accomplished by the Jordan miracle that the LORD announced in 3:7 is now most certainly fulfilled. The LORD in grace causes Joshua as leader to bask in the honor of having been the servant the LORD employed to accomplish the salvation of his people. (CC)

The man who had once been “the minister of Moses” (1:1) now by the LORD’s design and mighty action enjoys the same honor as the great Moses. The oft-repeated theme “as Moses, so Joshua” is especially strong in this verse. God accomplished similar miracles under their direction: the dry crossing of the Red Sea and the dry crossing of the Jordan River (4:23 compares the two miracles). Both covenant leaders received similar consequent exaltation in the eyes of Israel. (CC)

We may compare 4:14 to two verses in Exodus that have the same verb, “to fear” (אָרַץ). After Israel miraculously crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and saw the drowned Egyptians on the shore, “Israel saw the great hand that the LORD did against Egypt, and the people *feared the LORD*, and they believed in the LORD *and in Moses*, his servant” (Ex 14:31). Later, after Moses descended from Sinai, where he had met

with God, “Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, *and they were afraid* to approach him” (Ex 34:30). (CC)

The lengths to which the LORD has gone so that Israel would revere its new leader as it had the old one shows how earnest the LORD is about wanting respect for leaders of his people. This respect involves both fear and faith. Some newer translations are in the habit of translating verbs for “fear” in the OT and NT as “respect,” “honor,” or other mild terms, but that fails to convey the force of the original. “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10; see also Prov 1:7; 8:13; 10:27; and contrast Ex 20:20 with Gen 20:11). Josh 4:14 is an excellent example of God’s people acting in concord with the Fourth Commandment (Ex 20:12), which Luther explains in terms of both Law and Gospel, “fear” and “love”:

We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honor them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them. (CC)

This applies especially to faithful leaders in the church, who minister to God’s people on behalf of God himself. (CC)

4:15–18 The Lord caused the miracle and directed the activity around it. This recurring literary pattern gives structure to Josh: (1) the Lord commands Joshua, (2) Joshua commands Israel, and (3) Israel obeys the command. (TLSB)

4:15 Josh 4:15 opens the third and final round of the three-part pattern in chapters 3–4. (CC)

4:16 *testimony*. Hbr terms for “covenant” and “testimony” were sometimes used interchangeably (cf Ex 31:18; Dt 9:11). (TLSB)

By his command to Joshua, the LORD shows that the ark of the covenant—the location of his presence—is at the very center of the events of salvation, as has been evident throughout the crossing account. This time the ark is called “the ark of the testimony” (4:16). The two stone tables of the Ten Commandments inside the ark give testimony to the LORD’s covenant with Israel. (CC)

The new covenant does not rely on tablets of stone inside a wooden ark. Instead, when Christ instituted the sacred Meal, he declared, “This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Lk 22:20; see also 1 Cor 11:25). The shed blood of Christ is the basis for the new covenant; it is the “testimony” that Christ has atoned for our sins. When we receive the Lord’s Supper, we receive into our bodies this very blood, and with it we receive the forgiveness of sins according to his Word. (CC)

The “testimony” of Christ’s accomplished work of salvation is recorded in the pages of Scripture. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we receive that “testimony” in our hearts through faith. The indwelling of Christ’s Word and the Spirit, who works through Word and Sacrament, makes each Christian a member of the body of Christ and a holy temple (1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19–20; Eph 2:19–21). (CC)

4:17 From v 11, it appears that the priests with the ark have already crossed over. Here in v 17, it seems they still stand in the dry riverbed. Narration may be arranged topically, not chronologically. In reference to time, the command of v 17 may have preceded the action of v 11. (TLSB)

4:18 *covenant*. Josh 4:18 narrates the action that closes out the great miracle itself. The priests follow the command of Joshua that the LORD himself first gave. Repetition is again inevitable in this structure that brings out the chain of command. (CC)

Soles of the priests’ feet. It is precisely when the “the soles of the feet of the priests were lifted up onto the dry ground” that the waters of the Jordan resume their normal flow (3:18). Like the timing of the priests’ first steps into the water (3:13, 15), their last steps out reveal that the dry crossing was the result

of a mighty miracle of the LORD and not a coincidental quirk of nature. The timing of the lifting up of their feet and the return of the waters is exact. The author wants all readers to exclude naturalistic interpretations that dismiss the hand of Yahweh as the sole means for the salvation of his people. Full credit for the Jordan event belongs to him. Yahweh himself is the only cause. He uses the soles of his priests to time the start and finish of his miracle. (CC)

overflowed. River returns to its flooded condition (3:15). (TLSB)

4:19 *tenth day of the first month*. The day the Passover lamb was to be selected (Ex 12:3). (CSB)

The 10th of Abib (later, Nisan) our Mar/Apr. Exactly 40 years earlier on this day, the Israelites selected lambs for the Passover before their exodus from Egypt (Ex 12:3). The lambs were sacrificed on the 14th of Abib (Ex 12:6). (TLSB)

With the crossing narrative itself now complete at 4:18, the author moves forward with concluding actions and details. The first detail is that the crossing has taken place on a single day. The day is noted precisely as “the tenth day of the first month” (4:19). The older name for the first month of the Israelite calendar was Abib (e.g., Ex 13:4; 23:15), meaning “grain on the stalk,” since the grain harvest was at that time. Toward the end of the OT era, the first month’s name became Nisan (Esther 3:7; Neh 2:1). This “first month” corresponds with our March/April. (CC)

The detail concerning the tenth of the first month is significant for several reasons:

- It is a reminder that the LORD stopped the Jordan in the springtime when its waters surge their strongest at flood stage.
- It links the Jordan miracle with the Red Sea miracle, which also took place in this first month, and thus again connects Joshua with Moses.
- It anticipates the first celebration of Passover in the promised land, which will take place four days later, on the fourteenth of the same month (Josh 5:14).
- Each subsequent year, when the Israelites would select their Passover lambs, which anticipated “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), they would also remember the saving act of the LORD at the Jordan. According to Ex 12:3–6, the Passover lambs were to be selected on the tenth of Abib—the same day that Israel crossed the Jordan—and sacrificed and eaten on the fourteenth day. (CC)

Gilgal. Usually identified with the ruins at Khirbet el-Mafjer, two miles northeast of Jericho. (CSB)

While the precise location of Gilgal is uncertain, it is Israel’s first campsite in the promised land. It is commonly identified with Khirbet el-Mafjher, about a mile and a third northeast of Jericho. The mention of Jericho in locating Israel’s first campsite in the promised land (“on the eastern border of Jericho,” 4:19) anticipates the events of chapter 6. Interest is thus aroused for the coming episode and the continuation of Rahab’s story, begun in chapter 2. (CC)

4:20 In v 8, these stones were laid down there. Now Joshua sets them up as a memorial (v 7). (TLSB)

Josh 4:20 centers on the setting up of the riverbed memorial stones at Gilgal. This verse overlaps somewhat with the action stated by prolepsis in 4:8. However, the subjects and verbs describing the action in the two verses are different. In 4:8 it is the twelve Israelites who bring the twelve stones with them as they cross the river and place them at the lodging place. In 4:20 it is Joshua who “set up” the stones at the place, which is now named as “Gilgal.” The action of 4:8 only goes as far as to say that the stones were deposited at the place, while Joshua’s action in 4:20 involves the construction of the stones into the memorial. (CC)

4:21 Repetition from v 6 stresses the need for continuing catechesis in the saving acts of the Lord. In v 6, Joshua addresses the 12 stone carriers; in v 21, he speaks to the Israelites. His audiences are different, yet readers get the benefit of repetition. (TLSB)

Josh 4:21 reiterates Joshua's earlier command to teach children the meaning of the twelve-stone memorial (4:6–7). The repetition underscores the critical need for continuing catechesis in the saving acts of the LORD. There dare be no gaps in the chain of teaching lest there be a lost generation that has not been taught to fear and love their Lord. The stone memorial will endure for years as a visible teaching tool, but its stones themselves will be silent. Parents must do the talking! (CC)

Compare the children's question in 4:21 with the Passover question asked by the children in Ex 12:26 and 13:14. These OT catechetical questions involve a reversal of the roles we usually follow today: children ask the questions while adults supply the answers. An application of this method of instruction would involve a class devoted to kids quizzing the teacher. Of course, children often need to be prompted to ask the appropriate questions. Asking the right question is the beginning of right learning. (CC)

For some of the many other OT passages that refer to instructing children, see Ex 13:8; Deut 4:9; 11:19; 31:12; Pss 34:12 (ET 34:11); 78:1–8; and much of Proverbs, especially. (CC)

4:22 *God dried up the Jordan.* Still another descriptive phrase for the miracle, along with “the water ... cut off,” “piled up in a heap” and “stopped flowing” (3:16). (CSB)

Highlights the grace and power of the Lord. (TLSB)

4:23–24 We understand Josh 4:23–24 to be the explanation of Joshua and not a continuation of the answer to be given by parents to children. (Our punctuation reflects this.) Others take these verses in the latter way. (CC)

4:24 *so that all ... might know.* The Lord's revelation of his power to the Israelites was a public event that all the Canaanites heard about (see 5:1), just as they had heard of the crossing of the “Red Sea” and defeat of Sihon and Og (2:10). *you.* The Hebrew can also be read as “they.” (CSB)

One aim of the Lord at the miracle at the Jordan is evangelism, that all people know His saving acts. That aim continues to be accomplished as people everywhere read of this miracle in Scripture. (TLSB)

In 4:24 the Jordan miracle flows into the life of every reader of the book of Joshua from every nation. One of the Spirit-stated purposes of the miracle spoken through Joshua is “so that *all the peoples of the earth* might know the hand of the LORD—that it is strong!” The LORD uses his power to make good on all his promises. The God of Israel wants everyone on earth to know this so that all the children of Adam will fear, love, and trust in him alone. While the book of Joshua was deposited first with Israel, the expression here shows that its message is intended for all the people of the earth in all nations, and for all time (“always,” 4:24). (CC)

hand of the LORD. Symbol of His strength. His miracle with the waters of the Jordan proclaims the power of his “hand.” (TLSB)

fear the LORD. Worship and serve him according to his commandments. (CSB)

Chapters 3–4 have displayed the LORD leading his covenant people westward from Shittim in Transjordan (3:1) to Gilgal near Jericho across the river in the Promised Land. Geographically, that is not far—less than fifteen miles. In time, it has not been long—not even two weeks. Spiritually, however, the LORD has

led his people a great distance. On the way they have seen a miraculous display of his power and grace. They have received spiritual training and instruction. The aims of the LORD in the Jordan event have all been met for the benefit of his nation. The journey has been rich in “the righteous acts of the LORD,” as the prophet testifies in Micah 6:5. (CC)

Luther offers a Christian exposition of Israel crossing over the Jordan. In doing so, he does not pass over the literal, historical reality of the event. Rather, he relies on the continuity of salvation history in both Testaments. He was familiar with the early church and medieval methods of interpretation. Luther said:

Joshua succeeds him [Moses] as leader; this is the ministry of grace. He leads the people into the Land of Promise, that is, to true righteousness in Christ; and the Israelites cross over the Jordan dry-shod, that is, as both sin and death draw back and yield to grace. (AE 9:284). (CC)

The Israelites now stand in Canaan. That does not mean that they have already stepped into “Eden regained” and are eating from the tree of life; that will not be fully accomplished until Revelation 21–22. However, they are the beneficiaries of God’s miracle of grace. The previous generation was baptized into Moses and ate and drank spiritual food; they drank from Jesus Christ, the Rock who accompanied them (1 Cor 10:1–6). Now this new generation has participated in their own salvation event through water. It is comparable to God’s earlier miracle, though on a smaller scale (Josh 4:23), and it has the same evangelistic and faith-strengthening purpose (4:24). (CC)

God’s people are already now in the land promised long ago to Abraham, the same ground where the Seed of Abraham and Heir of the land will come in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4). The same God whose “hand” they have seen (Josh 4:24) will become incarnate, conceived of a virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit, and will truly have a human body with hands. He will live, die, and rise again to open eternal paradise to people of all lands. His hands will be pierced by nails on the cross in the supreme display—visible to all peoples—of the power of God to save: Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:18–31). The Israelites who have crossed the Jordan will soon celebrate the Passover, which prefigures and anticipates him (Josh 5:10). (CC)

The acacias of Shittim and the palms on the plains of Jericho near that City of Palms are milestones in wood along the road of grace history. The journey is leading toward the tree of the cross (1 Pet 2:24), eighteen miles southwest of the City of Palms, Jericho, and finally to “the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev 2:7). Tracing salvation history can be seen as following the “tree line” from humanity’s fall into sin at the tree in Eden (Gen 2:9, 17; 3:6, 15) to the earthly life of the carpenter; Palm Sunday; the “nailing” of him to a cross (Acts 2:23); his bodily resurrection in a garden; and the tree of life in the new garden in the new heavens and new earth (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19). Chapters 3 and 4 of Joshua trace a bit of that tree line from Shittim (“the acacia trees,” Josh 3:1) to Jericho (Josh 4:19), “the city of palm trees” (Deut 34:3; Judg 1:16; 3:13; 2 Chr 28:15). (CC)

Chapter 4. Israel safely and miraculously enters the Promised Land, and Joshua exulted (3:7). The stone memorials will serve to teach the power of God in judgment and salvation... Praise to You, O Lord, that Your hand controls our enemies, Satan, sin, and death, and that the hands of our risen Savior were once pierced for our salvation. Amen