

## ***Stand Still in the Jordan***

*By Dr. Dave Neale*

### **Introduction and Behind the Text**

Let's place the Joshua story in context..... We actually come to a difficult period in the story of the Bible. There is no point in pretending that the time of entry and conquest of Canaan is not challenging to modern sensibilities.

Basically, the next 250 pages of the Bible are about Israel's rise from a nomadic confederation of tribes to the culmination in empire under Solomon, a period of about 400 years. Joshua, the story of the initial entry, the period of the Judges, prophet-like figures in the loosely confederated tribes, then Samuel and the emergence of the monarchy, further recorded in Kings, Chronicles.

Today, we understand that invasions of indigenous populations are a sad part of human history. The truth is that the conquest of the Promised Land presents difficult problems to the modern mind. How often have you heard the response from someone outside the church, 'I want nothing to do with the God of the Old Testament.'

The answer to the disquiet of our minds is context.

In this case it wasn't a conquest by an established empire, but the slow overwhelming of Canaanite cities by the Israelites; cities which were in social decline and unable to resist the new invaders.

The "conquest" of Canaan took many generations and proceeded as much by assimilation as by military might. It is 400 years between the crossing of the Jordan and the rise of the monarchy.

This was a painful but necessary part of the story of God; it was an episode of historical necessity. None of this is a defense of the war that the Israelites prosecuted, but we need to see the history of God in its context.

### **In the Text**

When ***...the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water...***, the waters of the Jordan pile up, vs 13 and 16, "rising up in a single heap far off at Adam." This is 20 km upstream. The water drains away into the Dead Sea, 12 km downstream.

The valley that runs from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea is called the Jordan Rift. It's 65 miles and the entire region is below sea level. Beginning with the Sea of Galilee at 212 meters below sea level, to the Dead Sea at 430 meters below sea level, the lowest point on the face of the earth.

It floods every year, or at least did then, ***...now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest.***

The Sea of Galilee is fresh water, with both an inlet and an outlet. The Dead Sea has no outlet and that is why it has become saline over the eons through evaporation. The Dead Sea is almost 9x saltier than the oceans. And with its low altitude, its air is laden with minerals and heat. It is a difficult place to breath, but a great place to soak your achy body.

On that great day of fulfilment of the promise to enter the land given to them by the Lord, when the priests put their feet in the water, they see the river drain away.

This occurs just to the east of Jericho, that ancient city of what was to become southern Judea. Archeological work of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Charles Warren first discovered ancient walls there.<sup>1</sup>

The parallels to the Red Sea event and the crossing of the Jordan are obvious. They use the same language. Water “piled up/stand in a heap/a wall of water” (Ex 14:21-22; Josh 3:13, 16). Their feet proceed on “dry ground” where a body of water stood (Ex 14:21-22; Josh 3:17).

Here we have an obvious bracketing, in which the people leave slavery *on dry ground* where there was a body water, and they move from the wilderness to the Promised Land *on dry ground* where there was a body of water.

Stand Still in the Jordan! This is it. The place of promise.

### **From the Text**

I have several observations to make about the relevance of this ancient text.

Firstly, it is wonderful to see the promise fulfilled at last; we revel in the miracle that took them from the wilderness to the land of Caanan. But the clouds of conquest darken the sky ahead.<sup>2</sup>

It is one of the great moments of fulfilment in the history of God. So also, the birth of Isaac. The deliverance across the Red Sea. The crowning of King Solomon at the height of Israelite empire. The resurrection – all moments of great fulfilment. And we rejoice!

*But...* curiously, each of these moments were ambiguous in their own time and context. Each fulfilment was a mix of blessing and terror. Isaac steals Esau’s blessing. They go through the Red Sea to face a wilderness of want and suffering.

Solomon’s vast kingdom, the full bloom of national promise, soon crumbles under Assyrian pressure. Jesus’ resurrection is believed by some, but mocked as nonsense by most.

In a world of ambiguity, we are commanded to Stand Still in the Jordan. Promise is where we are called to stand by God in life.

And please tell me, how can it be that now, 3400 years later, the fighting continues? The suffering of the innocents unabated after all this time.

There is something fundamentally wrong in the world in spite of the progress of the last 3400 years. We have an apocalyptic problem of sin in our world. *We need a saviour.*

Before the second World War H.G. Wells was full of the optimism of social progress (1937).

“Can we doubt that presently our race will more than realize our boldest imaginations, that it will achieve unity and peace, and that our children will live in a world made more splendid and lovely than any palace or garden that we know...”<sup>3</sup> H. G. Wells

Nine years later, after World War II (1946) he said:

“...to a world from which such things [as war] had seemed well nigh banished – has come near to breaking my spirit altogether.”

The command from the Lord through Joshua to the priests was as follows: ***“When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, you shall stand still in the Jordan.”***

We too must stand in the place of promise and fulfilment, even though we live in the 'not yet.'

My second observation has to do with how we reconcile the violent tribal origins of the people of Israel, that 250 pages, with the Jesus of the NT, who bids us love our neighbor as ourselves, and to turn the other cheek?

You cannot look at the 400 years of Joshua, Judges, Kings and Chronicles and reject Christian faith; we must look at the whole. That was a painful but necessary part of the history of God and his people.

Christian theology sees history as an unfolding of the promises of God over 18 centuries. It is all one story. The story doesn't stop with the conquest, it **culminates** in the love and self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is the message of universal human love that fully expresses the Promise Land to which God called his people in the first instance. And to which he calls us afresh every day.

The prophet Isaiah saw it. ***In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established... and all the nations shall stream to it... they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.*** (Isa 2:2-4)

The history of God culminates in the reconciliation of humanity, Jew and Gentile, and yes... Israeli and Palestinian, Ukrainian and Russian, man and woman, rich and poor, the indigenous and the newcomer.

At the resurrection history turned to a new direction, not yet realized, but to the reconciliation of all things to God through Christ.

After recounting the generations that brought us to the Christ, the author of Hebrews says, now we are to Stand Still in the Jordan: ***...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding the shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*** (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Love has conquered everything! We just need to get up everyday and work that out to the best of our ability.

Stand Still in the Jordan.

***We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation but we ourselves... while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*** (Ro 8:22-23)

The call of the Ten Commandments to break the cycle of violence took 14 centuries - from Moses to the resurrection of God's own son. The cycle of violence cosmically accomplished by God Himself, declaring an end to reign of sin and death. Jesus is our saviour from our apocalyptic problem of sin today.

And now let us come to his table to be nourished and renewed in mind spirit with Communion.

Benediction:

And now, may the God who calls us to stand fast in the promises of God, give you the strength in the coming week to stand in the hope of reconciliation for us all. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

<sup>1</sup> It wasn't large, but it was massively fortified, surrounded by a wall from 5-6 ft thick and 12-17 ft high, with a moat 27 ft wide cut out of solid rock. It was one of the few walled cities in Palestine. This isn't where I would start my "conquest."

<sup>2</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. OT, 270. How can what is so good co-mingle with the evil of taking occupied land? One commentator put it this way, "For ancient Israel this obedience [to occupy the land] was an act of faith in the God who brings good out of evil

<sup>3</sup> H.G. Wells, *A Mind at the End of Its Tether* (1946), quoted from p 165 of *The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller.