

## WHY DO JOSHUA'S READERS KEEP CROSSING THE RIVER? THE NARRATIVE-GEOGRAPHICAL SHAPING OF JOSHUA 3–4

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The turbulent waters of the Jordan River stood as a threatening barrier before the Israelite army on the march, a formidable obstacle between promise and fulfillment. God had promised the nation of Israel that they would cross the river and take possession of the land beyond. Consequently, the reader of Joshua expects to read about a river crossing. But as Joshua's readers relive this story in chapters 3–4, they encounter mention of crossing 21 times. And more importantly, they encounter the word "Jordan" 28 times (more than once in every two verses). The narrator says it. Joshua says it. The Lord himself says it over and over again as the writer draws the reader's eyes back to the roiling water of the Jordan. This leaves the careful reader of this text with an important question: Why do Joshua's readers keep crossing the river?

Some analysts have concluded that this "doubling back and forth across the river" illustrates how these particular chapters are a literary mess, a jumble of chronology, geography, and point of view that is the product of a complex and disrupted literary history.<sup>1</sup> We have greater confidence in the integrity and clarity of this text and so will pursue the literary logic behind this repetition. Our conclusion is that the repetition of the word "Jordan" is designed to simulate a portion of the actual event for the reader. Just as the Israelites were brought to the edge of the Jordan River and remained there for three days (Josh 3:2), so the reader is required to linger beside the Jordan River via this literary convention. By creating this parallel experience of lingering by the river, the original event and narrated event can lead to the same outcome—a greater respect for Joshua as general and a deeper respect for the Lord their God (Josh 3:7, 10; 4:14, 24). We propose that the repetition of the word "Jordan" participated in accomplishing that goal.

In the paragraphs that follow, we will briefly survey the various methods that have been used to investigate the text and inquire about their understanding of the repetition. We will then summarize and apply the narrative-geographical method that will be employed here to analyze the text. Finally, we will demonstrate by using this method how the repetition of the word "Jordan" dramatically enhances the character of Joshua and the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Daniel Hawk, *Joshua* (Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) xvii, 54, 58.

## I. METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Why do Joshua's readers keep crossing the river? A survey of the literature indicates that previous study of this text has employed both diachronic and synchronic analysis. Here we briefly survey previous scholarship, paying particular attention to the way in which it has addressed the repeated references to the Jordan River.

1. *Diachronic analysis.* The scholarly approaches represented most frequently in the previous study of this text fall into the category of diachronic analysis. Source criticism, tradition criticism, redaction criticism, and form criticism all make an appearance in the study of Joshua.<sup>2</sup> Source and tradition criticism have attempted to define and delineate the various sources that came together to create the present text of Joshua 3–4.<sup>3</sup> Form critics have pursued the *Sitz im Leben* of the story.<sup>4</sup> And redaction criticism has focused on the editing process that brought the various traditions together.<sup>5</sup> While scholars using this array of approaches come to different conclusions about the text, one observation is consistently made by all. As a narrative, Joshua 3–4 lies in disarray, leaving its readers in confusion.<sup>6</sup> Problems for the reader include the revolving set of names used for the Ark of the Covenant, the number and location of the monuments erected to commemorate the event, and the multiple crossings of the river.<sup>7</sup> In the end, diachronic analysis has arrived at no consensus in its attempts to untangle the complex composition of the text and has left the meaningfulness of the multiple crossings of the Jordan River unaddressed.<sup>8</sup>

2. *Synchronic analysis.* Various types of synchronic analysis have also been applied to the text of Joshua. These narrative-rhetorical approaches

<sup>2</sup> Jerome F. D. Creach, *Joshua* (IBC; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 44.

<sup>3</sup> Duplicate structural elements have fueled the search for multiple sources. Scholars have claimed evidence both for JEDP material as well as evidence for multiple early traditions. See the discussion in the following: Trent C. Butler, *Joshua* (WBC 7; Waco, TX: Word, 1983) 41; John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 66; Martin Noth, *Das Buch Josua* (2d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1953) 31–33; E. Vogt, "Die Erzählung vom Jordanübergang, Josua 3–4," *Bib* 46 (1965) 125–48.

<sup>4</sup> This story is said to reflect a periodic rite held at Gilgal in commemoration of the Red Sea crossing. Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) 77–144; J. Maxwell Miller and Gene M. Tucker, *The Book of Joshua* (CBC; London: Cambridge University Press, 1974) 35; J. R. Porter, "The Background of Joshua 3–5," *SEA* 36 (1971) 5–23; Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 28; J. Alberto Soggin, *Joshua* (OTL; London: SCM, 1972) 51.

<sup>5</sup> Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC 6; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 97; Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 78; Brian Peckham, "The Composition of Joshua 3–4," *CBQ* 46 (1984) 413–31. Soggin details six recensions of the story, each of which introduces new material (*Joshua* 52).

<sup>6</sup> Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* 66; Hawk, *Joshua* 54; Nelson, *Joshua* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 55; Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* 28.

<sup>7</sup> Creach, *Joshua* 48; Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* 67; Hawk, *Joshua* 96.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson, *Joshua* 55.

have presumed that one may find unity and continuity in the story when it is read as a whole.<sup>9</sup> Rather than seeing the various names used for the Ark and the number of monuments erected as a problem, this scholarship calls for a concerted effort to make sense of the text as it has come down to us, honoring the fact that "what now looks like an insertion, a duplicate, or an interruption may well be the unique manner in which the Hebrew narrative is constructed."<sup>10</sup> Such synchronic analysis has successfully demonstrated the structural unity of Joshua 3-4 illustrating distinctive roles for each of the chapters.<sup>11</sup> Of particular note is the work of Dorsey and Winther-Nielsen. Dorsey demonstrates a chiasmic relationship between the components of these chapters and similar components in chapter 6.<sup>12</sup> Using the signals from discourse grammar, Winther-Nielsen demonstrates the unity of the narrative and reveals points of emphasis in the narrative indicated by the grammatical choices of the author.<sup>13</sup> These synchronic approaches clearly demonstrate that we have an integrated text unit to study, one that begins on the east side of the river and ends on the west with the Israelites departing from Shittim and arriving at Gilgal. But again the repetition of the word "Jordan" remains uninvestigated.

## II. NARRATIVE-GEOGRAPHICAL ANALYSIS

Given the absence of a satisfying answer to the question, we now pursue the crossing of the river using a narrative-geographical approach. This interdisciplinary approach seeks to blend the insights offered both by narrative criticism and geographical study. It acknowledges that biblical authors may carefully and artfully use geography in order to shape the perspective of their readers. As such, narrative-geography is related to the study of physical, historical, and human geography but distinct from them. Physical geography investigates the land through the lens of topography, geology, hydrology, climate, forestation, land use, urbanization, and transportation.<sup>14</sup> Historical and human geography examine the role such physical geography plays in the shaping of history and culture.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to these more traditional uses of geography, narrative geography analyzes the literary function

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>10</sup> Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* 13. See also Saydon on this very text: Paul P. Saydon, "The Crossing of the Jordan," *CBQ* 12 (1950) 207.

<sup>11</sup> The text may be divided into the following units: Josh 3:1-6: preparation for the miracle; Josh 3:7-17: the divine miracle; Josh 4:1-14: specific details of the crossing; Josh 4:15-24: the erection of memorial stones. In each of these four sections the same pattern is followed: a command is given to Joshua; the command is transmitted to the people; and the command is carried out (Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* 78-79).

<sup>12</sup> Dorsey has proposed a chiasmic structure that links the elements of the text from chapters one through eight. David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis-Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 91.

<sup>13</sup> Nicolai Winther-Nielsen, *A Functional Discourse Grammar of Joshua: A Computer-Assisted Rhetorical Structure Analysis* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1995) 175.

<sup>14</sup> Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Bible Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 25-69.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. xv.

of geographical references within a story. It acknowledges that the author may strategically use, reuse, and nuance geography in order to impact the reading experience. To be sure, the author's choice of setting was powerfully influenced by the traditional setting of the reported event. Nevertheless, "these authors controlled the selectivity of detail in the description of settings, requiring the reader to pay close attention to these textual signals."<sup>16</sup> In this same vein, Bar-Efrat concludes, "places in the narrative are not merely geographical facts, but are to be regarded as literary elements in which fundamental significance is embodied."<sup>17</sup> Previous investigation has demonstrated that biblical authors may employ geography as a narrative tool to shape the plot,<sup>18</sup> to develop the characterization,<sup>19</sup> to offer ironic energy to a story,<sup>20</sup> and to provide emphasis that encouraged travel to an ancient worship site.<sup>21</sup> Given the penchant for literary repetition and geographical reference in Joshua,<sup>22</sup> a narrative-geographical approach promises to help us answer the question before us: Why do Joshua's readers keep crossing the river?

1. *Narrative insights.* A narrative-geographical analysis begins by identifying all the formal geographical references in a text, seeking to understand the physical realities behind such references. It then inquires about the literary use of that geography. The following narrative and geographical insights are a product of that study. We begin with the narrative insights by examining the repetition itself, the clustering of repeated forms, and the antecedent use of the term.

Repetition was clearly an important literary device for the writers of the OT.<sup>23</sup> This is particularly evident in Joshua 3–4 where commentators

<sup>16</sup> Tremper Longman III, "Biblical Narrative," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 75.

<sup>17</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOT Bible and Literature Series 17; Sheffield: Almond, 1989) 194. See also John A. Beck, "The Storyteller and Narrative Geography," in *Translators as Storytellers. A Study in Translation Technique* (Studies in Biblical Literature 25; New York: Peter Lang, 2000) 165–96.

<sup>18</sup> John A. Beck, "Geography and the Narrative Shape of Numbers 13," *BSac* 157 (2000) 271–80.

<sup>19</sup> John A. Beck, "Faith in the Face of Famine. The Narrative-Geographical Function of Famine in Genesis," *The Journal of Biblical Storytelling* 11 (2001) 58–66; *idem*, "Why Did Moses Strike Out? The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Moses' Disqualification (Numbers 20:1–13)," *WTJ* 65 (2003) 135–41.

<sup>20</sup> John A. Beck, "Geography as Irony. The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Elijah's Duel with the Prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18)," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 17 (2003) 291–302.

<sup>21</sup> John A. Beck, "Mizpah and the Narrative-Geographical Shaping of 1 Samuel 7:5–13," *BSac* (forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> Even a casual and cursory reading of Joshua leaves the reader with the impression that geography was an important component of this author's thinking. Its very structure puts its focus on the land. Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 149–50.

<sup>23</sup> Sternberg dedicates an entire chapter to this critical matter. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative, Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 365–440.

have regularly called attention to the repetition of עבר, עמד, and ירע.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, the mere repetition of a word is not necessarily meaningful in and of itself. For example, the repetition of “and” (ו) in Hebrew narrative plays a critical role in constructing the grammar of the Hebrew sentence but is not given the literary status of *Leitwort*. Bar Efrat has observed that a keyword repetition must have certain qualities. The word under consideration must evidence less frequent use in the entire book and more frequent use in the smaller unit of text being studied.<sup>25</sup> Arguably the use of Jordan passes this test in our text. The word יַרְדֵּן is used seventy times within the Book of Joshua. Twenty-eight of those seventy uses (40%) occur in Joshua 3–4. Clearly this lexeme rises to the level of *Leitwort* in these two chapters.

Gunn and Fewell further observe that such keyword repetition can have a variety of narrative functions within the story. Repetition can be used to structure the plot of the story, to develop a theme within the story, to develop the reader’s view of a character, to create suspense, or mark a point of emphasis.<sup>26</sup> While these categories are not mutually exclusive, we will soon inquire about the way this repetition impacts the reader’s view of Joshua and the Lord.

Secondly, we note that the repetition of the word is not uniform throughout the chapters but that its repetition clusters at certain key points in the narrative. Winther-Nielsen’s analysis of the grammar indicates that the story reaches its first peak at Josh 3:14–17 and its second peak at Josh 4:15–18.<sup>27</sup> The complexity of the grammar and the detailed description of the river slow the reader down at these critical points of the story where the river crossing itself is narrated.<sup>28</sup> Within these two emphasized text units, we find the word “Jordan” used at a more aggressive rate than in other portions of the story (nine times). While these two verses in question represent 19% of the text, we find 32% of the occurrences here. This further emphasizes the importance of this *Leitwort* and directs the reader to seek its importance in the notion of “crossing.”

Finally, this lexeme draws the reader’s attention due to its antecedent use in the Torah and Joshua. In reading the entire OT, it is clear that the mention of the Jordan River is frequently associated with the idea of border. There continues to be debate on whether the eastern border of the Promised Land was the Jordan River or the Syrian Desert.<sup>29</sup> There is also some debate

<sup>24</sup> Creach, *Joshua* 46; Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* 68; Hawk, *Joshua* 63–65; Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* 105; Nelson, *Joshua* 59; Provan, Long, and Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* 151; Soggin, *Joshua* 54; Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* 78.

<sup>25</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* 212.

<sup>26</sup> David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 148.

<sup>27</sup> Winther-Nielsen, *A Functional Discourse Grammar of Joshua* 175.

<sup>28</sup> Various commentators have made similar observations, although not in the detail found in the work of Winther-Nielsen. Butler, *Joshua* 48; J. Gordon Harris, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000) 32; Hawk, *Joshua* 66; David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua* (NAC 5; Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1998) 130.

<sup>29</sup> Beitzel offers an excellent summary of the two perspectives (Beitzel, *The Moody Bible Atlas of Bible Lands* 10–11).

on whether or not the Jordan River really is an effective border.<sup>30</sup> But effective or not, the authors of the OT clearly perceive the Jordan River as a boundary.<sup>31</sup>

And what is true of all of the books in the OT is particularly true of those leading up to the book of Joshua. In Numbers, the word is used twenty-one times. Here the Jordan River becomes the gateway to the Promised Land (Num 33:48–51; 34:12). In Deuteronomy, the word occurs twenty-seven times, reminding the Israelites over and over again that they will cross the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land (Deut 2:29; 3:27; 4:26; 9:1; 11:31; 12:10; 27:2; 30:18; 31:13; 32:47). And once the reader of Deuteronomy begins to read the book of Joshua, he gets no farther than the eighth word of the second sentence before the word “Jordan” appears in the Lord’s commissioning words to Joshua, “Now rise, cross over this Jordan . . .” (Josh 1:2). Thus narrative analysis suggests that we ought to pay attention to this word because of its repeated use, its clustering at key points in the narrative, and the connotations associated with the word in antecedent references.

2. *Geographical insights.* To these narrative insights, we now add the geographical insights that will contribute to a deeper understanding of how the people who were required to physically linger by the river perceived the challenge of crossing it. Given the fact that there were no bridges across rivers in this region until Roman times,<sup>32</sup> those wishing to cross had to identify a reasonable place to ford it.<sup>33</sup> The ancient records indicate that such a river was crossed most often either by wading or, if the water was too deep to wade, by making floats from inflated goat skins or bundles of reeds.<sup>34</sup>

The best places to ford the Jordan River were those places where a tributary descended from the ridges above the rift valley depositing silt on the

<sup>30</sup> Butler takes the position that it is not a real political or communication border for most days of the year (*Joshua* 44). Pressler takes a similar view (*Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* 30). By contrast, Woudstra emphasizes the river’s ability to separate (*The Book of Joshua* 58). When one takes into account not only the river itself but also the topography, foliage, large predators, super-heated air, and risk of robbery associated with the Jordan Valley, this river valley certainly commands respect as an effective border. Denis Baly, *The Geography of the Bible* (London: Lutterworth, 1957) 200; Menashe Har-el, “The Pride of the Jordan,” *BA* 41 (June 1978) 69; George A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) 317.

<sup>31</sup> Thompson notes that of the 165 uses of the term in the OT, 117 deal with the notion of crossing and boundary. Henry O. Thompson, “Jordan River,” *ABD* 3.954. Cf. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III, eds., “Jordan River,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 460.

<sup>32</sup> R. L. Allen, “Jordan,” *ZPEB* 3.690. When Josephus remarks on this event, he notes that Joshua would have taken time to build a bridge but the threat of his enemies prevented him from planning and perfecting it (*Ant.* 1.1.3).

<sup>33</sup> Such fords played a key role in determining the location of roadways and of cities. David A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 37.

<sup>34</sup> Georges Contenau, *Everyday Life in Babylonia and Assyria* (London: Edward Arnold, 1954) 46–47. The Assyrians were particularly noted for their skill in crossing rivers with an army. Vincent Montgomery, *A History of Warfare* (New York: The World Publication Company, 1968) 56–57.

floor of the riverbed, making it shallower.<sup>35</sup> The crossing of the Jordan River reported in the OT consistently happens at such fords (Gen 32:22-23; Judg 3:28; 7:24; 8:4; 12:5-6; 2 Sam 17:16, 22; 19:18). In our text, Joshua and the Israelites were poised on the Plains of Moab opposite Jericho where just such a ford existed as silt washed down from the Wadi Qilt into the Jordan valley.<sup>36</sup>

As Joshua prepared to use the ford, he was doing so at a time of the year when such a crossing was very risky. The author of this text makes it clear that the Jordan River was at flood stage.<sup>37</sup> The heaviest rains had ceased (1 Sam 12:17), but runoff water continued to swell the local tributaries,<sup>38</sup> and snow melting from the higher elevations of Mount Hermon pushed the Jordan River over its banks.<sup>39</sup> While a desirable place to ford the Jordan River would be three to four feet deep,<sup>40</sup> the Jordan at this ford during this time of year would have been ten to twelve feet deep and one hundred and forty feet wide.<sup>41</sup> The approaches to the water would have been a mire, making every effort to get to the river a struggle in itself. And things did not improve as one prepared to set foot into the water itself, for the river was very turbid, making each step forward a blind step onto unknown footing.<sup>42</sup>

But perhaps the most threatening part of the crossing would have been the violent current that threatened to snag the feet from beneath the traveler. The Jordan River was far from a tranquil stream. Particularly at this time of year, it flowed with violent energy and power. Even the view from the bow of a boat instilled fear. While running the river in the nineteenth century, the American explorer, Lynch, described his experience with these words: "With its tumultuous rush, the river hurried us onward and we knew not what the next moment would bring forth—whether it would dash us upon a rock or plunge us down a cataract."<sup>43</sup> It is no wonder that ancient travelers viewed this part of their trip with great reluctance.<sup>44</sup> And it is no surprise that, when reading literature from the ancient Near Eastern world, we find

<sup>35</sup> Har-el, "The Pride of the Jordan" 69.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, "Jordan River" 957.

<sup>37</sup> Rahab had stalks of harvested flax on her roof (Josh 2:6). It is the tenth day of the first month (Josh 4:19). It is the time of the grain harvest when the river is at flood stage (Josh 3:15).

<sup>38</sup> Arie Issar, *Water Shall Flow from the Rock, Hydrology and Climate in the Lands of the Bible* (New York: Springer, 1990) 126.

<sup>39</sup> Baly, *The Geography of the Bible* 200.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* 313.

<sup>41</sup> Carl Ritter, *The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula* (New York: Greenwood, 1968) 4.51, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Francesco Suriano, *Treatise on the Holy Land* (Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 8; Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1949) 145.

<sup>43</sup> William F. Lynch, *Narrative of the United States' Expedition to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1849) 255.

<sup>44</sup> In a letter dating to the thirteenth century BC, the writer complained about various problems associated with the geography of Israel. Included among his concerns was the crossing of the Jordan River. James B. Prichard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (2d ed.; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955) 477.

rivers frequently described as serpents bent on bringing harm to those who dared wade past the shore.<sup>45</sup>

Those concerns take on greater clarity when we read the diaries of the early Christian pilgrims. Many such pilgrims visited the site of this crossing because it was also the traditional site of Jesus' baptism.<sup>46</sup> The guides taking individuals to the river imposed two critical rules on them: they were not to swim to the other bank, and they were not to dive beneath the surface.<sup>47</sup> Despite these precautions, each year the river claimed the lives of pilgrims who only wished to bathe in the water as their Lord had done.<sup>48</sup> "The river too . . . demands its victims, and hardly a year passes but some are carried away by the rapid stream and perish."<sup>49</sup> While narrative analysis indicates the importance of the Jordan River in the narrative, geographical study clearly points to the connotation of great risk associated with the crossing of the Jordan River at flood stage.

### III. THE CHARACTERIZATION OF JOSHUA AND THE LORD

By blending the insights obtained from the narrative and geographical analysis of this text, it becomes clear that the repetition of the term "Jordan" plays an important role in shaping the reader's view of Joshua and the Lord.

1. *Joshua*. As the newly minted leader of God's people, Joshua was as yet untested as a general. The Lord knew that the people would have questions about the qualifications of their new leader, so he tells Joshua that the events of this fateful day would exalt him in the eyes of the Israelites (Josh 3:7). As the nation stood by the flooding river and as the reader lingers at its side, it becomes clear that the water posed a logistical nightmare for Joshua, a real moment of testing.

History proves that the stakes were high. The Jewish leader Jonathan escaped harm when he and his soldiers crossed the Jordan River after they had been entrapped against its banks by the Greek general Bacchides. Bacchides declined to risk a crossing, allowing Jonathan and his men to

<sup>45</sup> S. Douglas Waterhouse, "The River-Dragon: Its Meaning in Scripture," in *The Archaeology of Jordan and Other Studies* (ed. Lawrence T. Geraty and Larry G. Herr; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1986) 621-38. Fear of being attacked by a beast that lived in the river still haunted Christian pilgrims to the Jordan River in the fifteenth century. "Felix Fabri," in *Palestine Pilgrim's Text Society* (New York: AMS, 1971) 9.18.

<sup>46</sup> There was also the rumor passed along in the pilgrim journals that for every hour one spent in the Jordan River one added an hour to one's life. "Felix Fabri," in *Palestine Pilgrim's Text Society* 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 12-13. H. F. M. Prescott, ed., *Friar Felix at Large* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950) 157; David Austin Randall, *The Handwriting of God in Egypt, Sinai and the Holy Land* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Co., 1862) 234.

<sup>48</sup> H. F. M. Prescott, ed., *Friar Felix at Large* 158; "Nicolo of Poggibonsi," in *Palestine Pilgrim's Text Society* (New York: AMS Press, 1971) 9.73.

<sup>49</sup> Carl Ritter, *The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula* (New York: Greenwood, 1968) 3.40.



escape (1 Macc 9:48). In a similar situation, the Pereans were trapped against the banks of the River opposite Jericho by the Roman general Vespasian. In contrast to Jonathan, the Pereans refused to enter the treacherous water, preferring their chances with the Roman soldiers on the nearer shore. Josephus reports that thousands died along the banks of the river as a result of this decision.<sup>50</sup>

Joshua had to cross the river. And the logistical challenges he faced were the kind that keep generals awake at night. Carl von Clausewitz was a Prussian military strategist who lived during the nineteenth century. In his classic work *On War* (still used in American war colleges today), he dedicates an entire chapter to the matter of river crossings. In that chapter, he identifies such a crossing as one of the greatest challenges that a general faces since it exposes the troops to very grave dangers. He says that “no general will place himself in such a position unless he can count on substantial moral and material superiority.”<sup>51</sup>

Joshua had undoubtedly run the list of potential problems through his mind again and again. The river could cause a delay in the crossing that would impact the intended timing of the assault.<sup>52</sup> The difficulty of negotiating the river and the mud on the banks, often as deep as a horse’s knees,<sup>53</sup> would create a vulnerability to attack and difficulty in retreat should it become necessary. And then there was the risk of drowning in the zigzag current that compromised footing and pulled one into the center of the river rather than toward the safety of the shore.<sup>54</sup> Once caught in that current, even a strong swimmer would be swept yards downstream.<sup>55</sup> No wonder the crossing of the river at flood stage was considered a heroic act by the writer of 1 Chronicles (1 Chr 12:15).

As the people lingered by the river and as the reader of Joshua 3-4 is reminded again and again of the setting, it becomes clear that this is a defining moment in the leadership of Joshua. The eyes of all are on him. And it is Joshua who takes center stage in bringing about the miraculous crossing. While the direct speech of the Lord represents 11% of this text, it is Joshua’s voice that we hear most often (27% of the text). The Lord directs, but it is the voice of Joshua that implements the plan of action. And at his direction the Israelites cross the river successfully.

<sup>50</sup> *Wars* IV.7.5.

<sup>51</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) 532-33.

<sup>52</sup> Carl Ritter, *The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula* (New York: Greenwood, 1968) 3.49.

<sup>53</sup> J. W. Mendenhall, *Echoes of Palestine* (New York: Philips and Hunt, 1888) 103.

<sup>54</sup> The current was much more of an issue than the depth. George A. Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* 313. Commanders of ancient armies thought very carefully and resourcefully about solving the challenge of swift currents. When the Indian army faced the challenge of such a current, they sought to mitigate its force by placing elephants in the water upstream to break the force of the current. Richard A. Gabriel, *The Military History of Ancient Israel* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003) 128.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Robinson, *Biblical Researches in Palestine and the Adjacent Regions 1838 and 1852* (Jerusalem: Universitas Booksellers, 1968) 1.536.

Assyrian generals boasted of their accomplishments in crossing the flooding Tigris and Euphrates River, listing such crossings among their most renowned acts.<sup>56</sup> In a similar way, the author of Exodus celebrates the role of Moses in providing access to a route through the Red Sea (Exod 14:31). As the repetition of the word “Jordan” keeps the challenge before the reader’s eyes, it also elevates the status of the man who directs the solution to the problem. Why do Joshua’s readers keep crossing the river? The repetition is designed to draw the reader’s attention to the great challenge before the Israelites, so that the prestige of Joshua might rise through the process of characterization as he solves the problem. “That day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel. . . .” (Josh 4:14 NIV).

2. *The Lord.* As the repetition of the word “Jordan” is contributing to the rising prestige of Joshua, it is also leading the people to a deeper respect for the Lord. Lingering by the water not only makes Joshua look like a great leader, it also magnifies the Lord. In Josh 3:10, we read that this will occur in connection with the day’s events. And in Josh 4:24, the retelling of the event to future generations is to have the same effect. The repetition of the word “Jordan” participates in that outcome by creating an association with the Red Sea crossing and by building a bridge to the promises extended to Israel in antecedent Scripture.

First of all, we note that the Jordan River as a water obstacle is formally linked with another water obstacle, the Red Sea. This is done in subtle and not so subtle ways.<sup>57</sup> On the one hand, the author of this narrative has used vocabulary to describe what happens to the water of the Jordan that is unique and reminiscent of the vocabulary used in Exodus to tell what happened to the water of the Red Sea. For example, the word נַי is used to describe the appearance of the water in both Exod 15:8 and in Josh 3:13 and 16. Furthermore, the author of Joshua makes it clear that the people passed through the riverbed on dry ground (Josh 3:17 בַּיַבֶּשֶׁה; 4:23 הַיַּבֶּשֶׁה), drawing on vocabulary that is reminiscent of the Red Sea Crossing (Exod 3:16, 22, 29 בַּיַבֶּשֶׁה; 3:21 לַתְּרַבָּהּ).

But the connection between the two events is much too important to leave to quiet allusion. Consequently, the narrator creates a direct link between the two water miracles: “The Lord your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over” (Josh 4:23 NIV). In the pages that follow, this linkage continues to surface in creedal statements of Israel such as Ps 66:6 and 114:5. Thus the repetition of the word “Jordan” reminds the reader again and again that we are dealing with a water miracle in this text. And what is more, we are dealing with a water-parting miracle that is formally linked to the crossing of the Red Sea. The sequel is to have the same affect on the nation of Israel as the original.

<sup>56</sup> John van Seters, “Joshua’s Campaign of Canaan and Near Eastern Historiography,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 2 (1990) 6–7.

<sup>57</sup> Nelson, *Joshua* 71.

In both cases, the miracle leads the observers to fear the Lord (יָרָא יְהוָה; Exod 14:31; Josh 4:24).

Time spent by the river enhances the Lord's reputation through this allusion, but it also creates a bridge between Joshua 3–4 and antecedent texts that speak of God's promises associated with this river. We noted earlier that the use of the word "Jordan" in the Torah increases in frequency and focus as we approach Joshua 3–4. In those texts, the Jordan becomes the border that must be crossed to gain access to the Promised Land. In a book that is absorbed with border and boundary description, the Jordan becomes the key border marker.<sup>58</sup> And its crossing "heralds the consummation of God's gracious acts in fulfillment of the promise of settlement" in the Promised Land.<sup>59</sup> Just as the Lord opened the door to deliver the Israelites from Egypt by removing the water of the Red Sea from the path of Israel, so the Lord opens the door to the Promised Land by making the Jordan River a non-boundary. Those who first stood on the Jordan's shores clearly could see that this was the last hurdle to cross before realizing that promise. And the reader encountering the literary representation of that water again and again is reminded of the same thing. Both are left in deeper awe of the Lord.

The Israelites stood beside the Jordan River for three days contemplating its importance as a boundary into the Promised Land and feeling the concern about crossing it safely. In the same way, the reader is brought again and again to see the roiling river by the repetition of the word "Jordan." The narrator says it. Joshua says it. The Lord himself says it over and over again. Narrative-geographical analysis of this text has shed new light on this repetition, allowing us to better answer the question of why Joshua's readers keep crossing the river.

<sup>58</sup> Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* 98.

<sup>59</sup> Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* 68.