

# Criticism, Chiasm, and Cosmic Conflict in Joshua 3-4

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**Abstract:** Source critics argue that phenomena in Joshua 3-4 show it to be a composite text, either preserving two inconsistent narratives of Israel crossing the Jordan or relaying a single narrative that was heavily revised by later editors. However, close attention to the text's repetition, order, and theological themes indicates that the chapters preserve a single, coherent narrative that bears a chiasmic structure. The chiasm focuses the reader's attention on the two sets of memorial stones constructed in the Jordan and at Gilgal, introducing a major literary device that appears throughout the rest of the book.

**Key Words:** Old Testament, Joshua, Jordan, Ancient Near East, Chiasm, Source Criticism

## A Composite or Unified Text?

Brian Peckham describes Joshua 3-4 as an "extraordinary disarray" of "digressions, repetitions, and contradictions" which give the narrative an overall "awkwardness."<sup>1</sup> The text's "awkwardness" suggests to many commentators that it is a composite work. Source critics such as John Garstang have argued that at least two different traditions of how Israel crossed the Jordan existed in ancient Palestine and that the compiler of Joshua stitched them together.<sup>2</sup> The text

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Peckham, "The Composition of Joshua 3-4" in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46.3 (July 1984): 413.

<sup>2</sup> Garstang believes Joshua 3-4 represents a "J" source and a "JE" source which have been stitched together (see John Garstang, *Joshua-Judges* [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1978], 13-14). Paul Saydon cites a few other

accordingly contradicts at several points (for example, Did Israel follow behind the priests [3:4], or did they pass on before the priests [4:10]? Were the memorial stones placed at Gilgal [4:3] or in the Jordan [4:9]?), and scholars must work to restore the original sources in order to discern what Israel historically did at the Jordan River.<sup>3</sup> Other source critics have suggested that Joshua 3-4 is based on only one ancient source that was later edited and enlarged into its present form.<sup>4</sup> Peckham highlights at least ten different theses presented by source critics regarding the composition of these chapters, all of which argue against an underlying unity in the text.<sup>5</sup>

Other scholars have gone the opposite route, arguing that the text as it now stands is both consistent and unified. Though most scholars allow that later editing could or did occur, this second group suggests that editors did less than source critics typically suppose.<sup>6</sup> Paul Saydon explains that the redundant and dischronologized nature of the narrative does not necessarily support the view that it is a composite work. Instead,

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popular explanations, including one theory that posits a P, JE, and Dtr source and another that argues for a J, E, and L source (“The Crossing of the Jordan: Josue 3; 4” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 12.2 [April 1950]: 194).

<sup>3</sup> J. Alberto Scoggin argues that the older source present in Joshua 3-4 describes an ancient Israelite liturgy in which the people reenacted the crossing of the Red Sea. However, a later source errantly historicized the event. In reconstructing the original document, Scoggin attempts to uncover what Israel’s reenactment ceremony entailed and thus give historians a deeper insight into their ancient religion (*Joshua: A Commentary* [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972], 51). Peckham, on the other hand, suggests that a primary difference between the two traditions is that the earlier saw Israel as an army under Joshua while the later saw Israel as a confederation of tribes united around the cult. In this view, the traditions highlight the changing self-perception of Israel as time wore on (“The Composition of Joshua 3-4,” 430).

<sup>4</sup> This is roughly the position of Rudolph and Noth, both of whom believed editorial work on Joshua 3-4 was largely done by an exilic or post-exilic Deuteronomist scribe. For a summary of their positions, see Peckham’s “The Composition of Joshua 3-4,” 413-415.

<sup>5</sup> Peckham, “The Composition of Joshua 3-4,” 413-418, 430-431.

<sup>6</sup> See Joseph Coleson, *Joshua* in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, vol. 3, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishing, 2012), 4-7.

responsible readers must recognize that ancient Hebrews wrote differently than moderns do. Considering the ancient and popular literary style of the biblical authors might account for the text's phenomena better than source criticism does.<sup>7</sup> John Beck tackles the same issue from a different angle, positing that the repetition in the text is a literary device that helps exalt Joshua and Yahweh in the reader's mind.<sup>8</sup> Scholars in this camp maintain that the story fits together as a unified whole, perhaps with little-to-no tension when read properly. As Robert Hubbard Jr. has noted, "...the final from [of Joshua 3-4] makes reasonably good sense."<sup>9</sup>

I would like to suggest a new angle by which we can approach this issue. The repetition in Joshua 3-4 exists not only for the literary reasons cited by Saydon and Beck, but it also gives the narrative a chiasmic structure. This in turn implies that the narrative has an essential unity. We can use an analogy from theistic apologetics: Can such a delicate narrative structure occur by chance? Could it realistically be the accidental result of an editor who somewhat messily sewed together his sources? If Joshua 3-4 does in fact have a chiasmic structure, it would indicate that the text is not composite. Instead, it would suggest that a single author intentionally crafted the story of Israel's crossing of the Jordan River into the form now found in Joshua 3-4. Further, if any parts of the chiasm were missing, the entire structure would collapse. A chiasmic structure in Joshua 3-4

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<sup>7</sup> Saydon, "The Crossing of the Jordan," 195-197. Saydon does not deny that multiple sources may be present. He also acknowledges that "the text may have suffered at the hands of editors and copyists" (207). Nonetheless, he maintains that taking into account the literary style of the text does away with many supposed difficulties which source critics so quickly identify.

<sup>8</sup> John A. Beck, "Why Do Joshua's Readers Keep Crossing the River? The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Joshua 3-4" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48.4 (December 2005): 689-699.

<sup>9</sup> Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., "What Do These Stones Mean?: Biblical Theology and a Motif in Joshua," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 11.1 (2016) 4.

would prove that the text has an inherent unity in it, contra source critics.

### **The Chiasm Presented and Defended**

Below is the proposed chiastic structure of Joshua 3-4:

- A Preparation to Cross (3:1-6)<sup>10</sup>
  - B God Promises Safety (3:7-13)
    - C Israel's Faith and Obedience (3:14-17)
      - D The Memorial Stones (4:1-10a)
        - C' Israel's Faith and Obedience Recounted (4:10b-13)<sup>11</sup>
  - B' God's Promises Fulfilled (4:14-18)
- A' Reflection on the Crossing (4:19-24)

In the sections that follow, I will first show how the narrative has a holistic unity before comparing the corresponding sections of the chiasm to show their thematic and literary connections.

#### Cultic Emphasis

Joshua 3-4 has a uniquely cultic character. These chapters emphasize the role of priests and the ark of the covenant more than the rest of the book. As G. Ernest Wright as noted, source critics usually attribute this phenomenon to later Deuteronomic editing (the "P" source).<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that every unit of the proposed chiasm has some sort of cultic

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<sup>10</sup> 2:24 and 5:1 both tell of the Canaanite's fear of Yahweh and Israel. These verses could potentially fit into the chiasm. This might suggest that a larger section of the book of Joshua has a chiastic structure. I have chosen to limit myself to only Joshua 3-4 here.

<sup>11</sup> This is the only place where I have deviated from the paragraph divisions as given in the ESV. The ESV places v.14 with 4:10b-13.

<sup>12</sup> This is Noth's famous thesis. See G. Ernest Wright's "Introduction" in Robert G. Boling's *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* in *Anchor Bible Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 56.

element. *A* mentions the “ark of the covenant” (v.3, 6; cf.v.4), the “Levitical priests” (v.3), the command to “consecrate yourselves” (v.5), and “the priests” (v.6). *B* references “the priests” (v.8, 13) and the “ark of the covenant” (v.8, 11, 13). *C* has “the priests” (v.14, 15, 17), “the ark of the covenant” (v.14, 15, 17), and “those bearing the ark of the covenant” (v.15).<sup>13</sup> *D* mentions “the priests” (v.3, 9, 10) and “the ark of the covenant” (v.5, 10). *C'* likewise mentions “the ark of the covenant” (v.11) and “the priests” (v.11). *B'* refers to “the priests” (v.15, 17, 18), “the ark of the testimony” (v.15), and “the ark of the covenant” (18). Finally, *A'* references the Passover (“the tenth day of the first month,” v.19), perhaps the most important cultic festival in Israel’s year.<sup>14</sup> Following from this last point, J. Alberto Scoggin notes that the text repeatedly uses the term “pass over,” helping readers identify the crossing of the Jordan with the crossing of the Red Sea.<sup>15</sup> These repeated allusions to the Passover strengthen the overall cultic theme of the chapters.

These observations push against the conclusions of source critics. If it is true that Joshua 3-4 ties together two or more textual traditions, then both traditions must have emphasized Israel’s priesthood independently, which is an unlikely hypothesis. If Wright and company are correct and cultic references come from a later Deuteronomic editor, then hardly a single verse in these two chapters remained untouched. While possible, source critics would face a conundrum at this point: The ark of the covenant and priesthood do not feature prominently throughout the rest of Joshua as they do here.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Scoggin suggests that the construction of these texts is rather heavy for ancient Palestinian literature, especially since it designates between “the priests” and “those bearing the ark of the covenant” (*Joshua*, 48). This does not seem especially troublesome. The author simply wanted to distinguish between the specific priests who carried the ark and all the other priests who accompanied them before the people of Israel.

<sup>14</sup> See Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 94-95.

<sup>15</sup> Scoggin, *Joshua*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> The major exception to this would be the story of Jericho in Joshua 6, in which the ark of the covenant and priests play a prominent role.

Why would the Deuteronomic editor so drastically alter the details of Joshua 3-4 while leaving the rest of the book comparatively untouched? The fact that nearly every verse in Joshua 3-4 has some cultic element in it seems instead to give an overarching unity to the narrative.<sup>17</sup>

## Speech Patterns

Peckham has argued that speech patterns help give the story a skeletal structure.<sup>18</sup> The speeches in Joshua 3-4 fit quite nicely into the chiasmic structure proposed above.<sup>19</sup> *A* and *A'* are both dominated by speeches given by Joshua. Peckham notes that although *A* also includes a speech by “the officers” (v.2-4), Joshua is the dominant speaker in this section.<sup>20</sup> This is emphasized by the double usage of “Joshua said” (v.5, 6). *B* and *B'* also parallel each other: God speaks, then Joshua addresses a group. Interestingly, *C* and *C'* are the only sections which do not have any speeches. *D*, the center of the chiasm, contains Joshua’s most important speech, as he commands Israel to set up memorial stones. While Peckham does not see a chiasm in the text, the speech patterns he highlights help support and defend the structure of the text proposed above.

### A and A': Anticipation and Reflection

These two units thematically connect with each other: In *A*, Joshua spoke to ready the people for their crossing; in *A'*, he spoke to help Israel reflect on their crossing. Both are theocentric: *A* anticipated God’s “wonders” (3:5), and *A'*

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<sup>17</sup> Beck shows that scholarship has significantly shifted away from diachronic to synchronic analysis of the text. Phenomena such as different designations for the ark of the covenant are usually now seen as stylistic choices rather than evidence for multiple sources (“Why Do Joshua’s Readers Keep Crossing the River?” 690-691).

<sup>18</sup> Peckham, “The Composition of Joshua 3-4,” 418-423.

<sup>19</sup> I rely heavily on Peckham here, but I have modified his findings as needed. Peckham does not see a chiasm in the text and instead argues for a much more complicated structure.

<sup>20</sup> Peckham, “The Composition of Joshua 3-4,” 419.

recounted God's wonders at the Red Sea and Jordan (4:21-24). Literarily, they are connected by their first verses (3:1 and 4:19). 3:1 records Israel's journey from Shittim to the Jordan, and 4:19 focuses on Israel's journey from the Jordan to Gilgal. These pericopes also stand out as particularly holy in this overtly cultic narrative. *A* tells of Joshua's command, "Consecrate yourselves" (3:5), which at first seems out of place: Why must Israel purify itself before entering an unclean land? *A'* gives an answer: the Passover festival has dawned (4:19).<sup>21</sup>

### B and B': Promise and Fulfillment

*B* focuses on God's promises that the Jordan would stop when the priests stepped into it and that all the people would cross over safely. *B'* shows that these promises were fulfilled: Israel stood on the opposite bank, and the priests were called up out of the river. As soon as the priests safely set foot in Canaan, the river began to flow again. The two pericopes demonstrate this thematic connection by being the only portions of the story that mention the *soles* of the priests' feet (3:13; 4:18). Similarly, they both emphasize Moses. In 3:7, God promised to exalt Joshua as he did Moses, and, in 4:14, God fulfilled his promise as "[Israel] stood in awe of [Joshua] just as they had stood in awe of Moses..." This promise-fulfillment comparison between Moses and Joshua seems to serve as a literary indicator that the text has a chiasmic structure.<sup>22</sup>

### C and C': Faithfulness and Obedience

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<sup>21</sup> Consecration was already associated with Passover and the firstborns (see Exodus 13:1-2). This tight connection would continue later in Israel's history (2 Chronicles 35:6).

<sup>22</sup> Moses' name only appears four times in the narrative: Joshua 3:7; 4:10, 12, 14. These final three usages form a cluster, mentioning Moses three times in five verses. The author could be building the reader's expectation: The usages in 4:10 and 12 remind the reader of God's promise to Joshua in 3:7. Finally, 4:14 shows that God's words to Joshua were fulfilled, just as his promises to Israel in *B* are brought to completion in the rest of *B'*.

These passages both emphatically paint the picture of the priests standing in the Jordan while the entire nation passed on before them (3:17; 4:11). They also both mention Jericho (3:16; 4:13). Jericho is only mentioned one other time in the narrative (4:19). Like the name “Moses,” “Jericho” seems to be a literary indicator helping readers see the text’s chiastic structure. *C'* focuses on the crossing of the Transjordanian tribes, and, to parallel this, *C* mentions two cities in Transjordan: Adam and Zarethan (3:16). These are the only Transjordanian cities mentioned in Joshua 3-4, except for Shittim in 3:1. These two pericopes also play off each other by emphasizing warfare. This is obvious in *C'*: The Transjordanian tribes “passed over armed” (4:12), and “about 40,000 ready for war passed over” (4:13). However, the warfare in *C* is less overt and requires contextualization.

Joshua compares the crossing of the Jordan with Israel’s passing through the Red Sea (4:23-24).<sup>23</sup> Israel understood that God’s work in Egypt, including the Red Sea event, signaled his victory against the Egyptian pantheon (Exodus 14:14; 15:3).<sup>24</sup> This motif of “God vs. the gods” continues into the conquest and throughout the rest of Israel’s history.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the crossing of the Jordan records God’s first battle against a member of the

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<sup>23</sup> Scoggin’s believes Joshua 3-4 records an ancient Israelite liturgical practice in which they re-enacted the crossing of the Red Sea (see note 4). His demythologization of the text might convince many readers, but it leaves an important question unanswered: What happened at the Red Sea? If the Red Sea event was not miraculous (or if it did not happen at all), how did it come to have such a central place in Israelite theology and self-identity? And, if something rather spectacular *did* occur at the Red Sea, then why is it unthinkable that an equally incredible work occurred at the Jordan River?

<sup>24</sup> William Sanford LaSor, David Allen Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 68. See also Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: an exegetical, canonical, and thematic approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 385-386.

<sup>25</sup> For a helpful example of how this theme plays out during the time of the monarchy and split kingdoms, see Peter Leithart, *1-2 Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).



Canaanite pantheon, a battle that specifically occurs in pericope C of the proposed chiasm.

In Canaanite mythology, Yamm<sup>26</sup> was the serpent god of the seas and rivers.<sup>27</sup> He was the rival of Baal, the primary Canaanite god who ruled the sky, weather, and fertility. Angered that he did not have a position of higher authority, Yamm battled against Baal and nearly defeated him before the latter received aid from Kothar-wa-Khasis, the craftsman of the gods. The craftsman brought new weapons to Baal just as it seemed Yamm would conquer and kill him. With the aid of Kothar-wa-Khasis, Baal finally overcame and killed Yamm, though, like most ancient deities, Yamm did not stay dead permanently.<sup>28</sup>

Israel's crossing of the Jordan River should be read through the lens of the Baal vs. Yamm narrative. Upon entering Canaan, Yahweh's first rival was not Baal, the Canaanite's chief deity. Rather, it was Yamm, the god who, for all practical purposes, bested Baal. Unlike Baal, Yahweh had no difficulty fighting Yamm. Even though the Jordan River (which symbolized Yamm) was "overflowing all its banks throughout the time of the harvest," Yahweh easily halted the waters until his people passed over on dry ground (Joshua 3:15-17). Even though Yamm stood at full strength, Israel's God could symbolically tear him in two.

The text mentions that Israel crossed the Jordan "opposite Jericho" (Joshua 3:16). This event spelled bad news for the

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<sup>26</sup> This name has variant spellings, such as Yam and Yom.

<sup>27</sup> Yamm was likely depicted as a serpent since the curves of rivers cause them to look serpentine. See Jakob H. Grønæk "Baal's Battle with Yom – A Canaanite Creation Fight" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 10.33 (1985): 31.

<sup>28</sup> In the myth, Kother-wa-Khasis struck Yamm, practically incapacitating him. Baal was then able to easily finish him off. Baal's victory against Yamm was a close call and would not have been accomplished had he not been aided. See H. L. Ginsberg "Ugaritic Myths, Epics, and Legends" in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 129-142.

citizens of the city. As the rest of Joshua shows, Baal served as Canaan's chief deity. However, if Yahweh could easily slay Yamm, then this indicated that Baal could not protect the land from Yahweh's wrath. This helps to explain Canaan's reaction to Israel's crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 5:1:

As soon as all the kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan to the west, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the people of Israel until they had crossed over, their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel.

If Yamm could not stop Yahweh, then Baal and Canaan were also doomed to fall before him. Therefore, C pairs nicely with C' since both are explicit warfare texts: God defeated Yamm, and then the Transjordanian tribes joined the rest of the nation in marching over the river to defeat the Canaanites. The order here is important: God first brought judgment on the powers of Canaan (cf. Exodus 12:12), and then his people imaged him by executing judgment on the people of Canaan.

The story of God's victory over Yamm echoes the *protoevangelium* in Genesis 3:15. In the Garden, God swore that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head. The verse also shows that a continual warfare rages between those associated with the woman and those linked to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, / and between your offspring and her offspring..." As noted above, Yamm was a serpentine figure. As the conquest began, Yahweh struck the serpent so that his seed, Israel (see Exodus 4:22), could strike the serpent's seed. In fact, the conquest is bookended with foot imagery. After a powerful Canaanite coalition gathered against Israel at Gibeon, God miraculously gave his people victory (Josh 10:1-15). For all practical purposes, this broke the military strength of Canaan, though there was still fighting left to do. After this battle, five Amorite kings fled from Joshua. Finding

them, Joshua commanded his chiefs to “put [their] feet on the necks of these kings,” and the officials did so (Josh 10:24). The conquest began at the Jordan with God and Israel crushing the serpent’s head; it ended at Makkedah after the battle of Gibeon with the Israelites crushing the heads of the serpent’s seed. The chiasmic structure of Joshua 3-4 not only shows the unity of the Jordan narrative, but it also helps bring the cosmic conflict of the text to light, allowing readers to see a major theological theme that runs throughout the entire conquest.

This allusion to the *protoevangelium* explains one phenomenon in Joshua 3-4 usually pointed out by source critics: The text repeatedly mentions the priests’ feet (3:13, 15; 4:3, 9, 18). Rather than demonstrating the incoherent or repetitive nature of the narrative, this emphasis serves a theological purpose: Israel stood on Yamm as they crossed the Jordan, giving the impression that they were trampling the serpent underfoot. The seven usages of feet/soles helps to draw readers’ attention to this point and to show how complete God’s and Israel’s victory over Yamm was.<sup>29</sup> Further, the Old Testament sometimes refers to the ark of the covenant as God’s footstool (e.g., 1 Chronicles 28:2), and this furthers the Genesis 3:15 imagery, showing God himself standing on the serpent. This becomes even more noteworthy when considering the New Testament. Jesus – who is God incarnate – is the seed of the woman who “through death...destroy[s] the one who has the power of death...the devil” (Hebrews 2:15). Together, C and C’ show Yahweh and his people beginning the conquest by crushing the serpent under their feet (cf. Romans 16:20), foreshadowing their defeat of the serpent’s seed.

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<sup>29</sup> The usage of the word “rest” in Joshua 3:13 and 4:8 (in Hebrew) also seems to acknowledge this warfare motif. “Rest” is something that the land and Israel have after God defeats the Canaanites (cf. Josh 11:23; see its usage in Judges). The priests rest in the Jordan because a great foe, Yamm, has been vanquished (3:13). Because the memorial stones, which are reminders of God’s warfare, rest in the land (4:8), Israel has rest, too.

## D: The Memorial Stones

Having demonstrated that themes and literary devices give Joshua 3-4 a chiasmic structure, it is time to delve more deeply into the meaning of the text. Why did God lead Israel across the Jordan River? The center of a chiasm is always its most emphasized point, so we turn to *D* to answer this question. Joshua 4:1-10 centers on two sets of twelve stones that Israel built as a “sign” (v.6) and a “memorial” (v.7) of God’s work after crossing the Jordan. Joshua explained that the significance of these stones was essentially catechetical: “When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD” (v.6-7; cf. 4:21-24). The crossing of the Jordan was peripherally meant to teach the Gentiles about the might of the Lord (4:24-5:1), but it was more centrally about teaching coming generations of Israelites to fear God (4:24).<sup>30</sup>

The first monument was built by Joshua and remained where the priests had stood in the Jordan (4:9). Perhaps it would have only been visible when the river was at its lowest.<sup>31</sup> The second

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<sup>30</sup> See Hubbard, “What Do These Stones Mean?” 10-12. Hubbard also speculated that these stones would have helped Israel evangelize sojourners who traveled through their land.

<sup>31</sup> This is Hubbard’s suggestion (“What Do These Stones Mean?” 6-7), and it is shared by Scoggin (*Joshua*, 50). Scoggins suggests that Israel’s liturgical re-enactment occurred when the Jordan was at its lowest point, contra 3:15. The stones in the Jordan were steppingstones that helped keep the Israelites from getting wet (*Joshua*, 49-50). He thus interprets 4:9 as a pluperfect and connects it with 3:12, explaining why the twelve men were set aside before crossing the Jordan. They went first into the river to build a path for the others to walk on. This cuts against the entire thrust of the narrative which clearly states Israel walked on dry ground. Others have suggested that the monuments were stone altars (see Christopher Begg, “The Crossing of the Jordan According to Josephus” in *Acta Theologica*, 26.2, 2006, 8). These commentators often link this story with Deuteronomy 27:1-8’s command to build an altar upon entering the land. However, Deuteronomy 27:1-8 is referenced in Joshua 8:30-35 when Joshua builds an altar on Mount Ebal as Moses had commanded. The Gilgal monument may have doubled as an altar, but the monument in the Jordan could not have.

monument was built at Gilgal, where Israel first encamped in the Promised Land (4:3; cf. 5:9). Easily seen and made of smooth, round, arranged river rocks, it would have undoubtedly raised several questions.<sup>32</sup> It seems likely that Ehud, after leaving Eglon's palace, saw this monument to God's gracious works surrounded by idols (Judges 3:19). Angered by Israel's idolatry – especially in view of God's remembered mercies – Ehud returned and assassinated the evil and idolatrous king.

These were important monuments indeed, and it should come as no surprise that the story centers on their construction. God split the Jordan River so that coming generations of Israelites would live in faith knowing that he was faithful and powerful to accomplish what he promised. This does leave us with the question why there were two stone monuments erected in Joshua 4:1-10a rather than just one. Source critics often see Joshua 4:9's mention of a second monument as evidence that two or more traditions are present in the text.<sup>33</sup> Those who appeal to textual criticism and posit a transmission error have the burden of proof against them.<sup>34</sup> Their strongest support comes from Josephus, who curiously omitted any reference to stones being placed in the Jordan.<sup>35</sup> However, it seems that there is a rather clear theological rationale for the duplicity of monuments that is preferable to both these explanations. Though challenging, this question points us to a literary phenomenon that forms a theological backbone for the entire book of Joshua.

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<sup>32</sup> Hubbard, "What Do These Stones Mean?" 11.

<sup>33</sup> Scoggin, *Joshua*, 64-65. Saydon provides several views in "The Crossing of the Jordan," 201-203.

<sup>34</sup> Hubbard notes that the various versions of Joshua that we now have and "a sizeable consensus of scholars" all agree that a monument of stones was placed in the middle of the Jordan River ("What Do These Stones Mean?" 7).

<sup>35</sup> Begg, "The Crossing of the Jordan According to Josephus," 7-9.

## **A Synopsis of Joshua's Stone Memorials**

Stone monuments appear throughout the book of Joshua and serve as important literary devices: at the Jordan, Gilgal, the valley of Achor, Ai, Makkedah, and Shechem.<sup>36</sup> Notably, each of these monuments is associated with a battle that God won on behalf of Israel. We will begin with other stone monuments throughout the book of Joshua before returning to those mentioned in Joshua 3-4.

The first monument mentioned after the Jordan narrative was erected in the Valley of Achor (Joshua 7:26). After God miraculously defeated Jericho before the Israelites (Joshua 6), Achan sinfully stole goods from the city that should have been dedicated to destruction. Hubbard notices that by taking condemned goods, Achan himself became condemned.<sup>37</sup> By associating with Jericho, Achan became a Jerichoite, just as Rahab was considered an Israelite due to her loyalty to the nation. Jericho's defeat was therefore not complete until Achan was killed. Upon his death, Israel constructed a stone heap that covered Achan and his family and which "remains to this day" (Joshua 7:26; cf. 4:7).<sup>38</sup> This stone heap served as a memorial to God's final defeat of Jericho. Similar language appears in Joshua 8:29. After defeating Ai, Joshua executed the city's king before burying him under a rock heap, "which stands there to this day." This heap served as a memorial as well, reminding Israel of the victory God gave them over Ai.<sup>39</sup> Further, "Ai" means "ruins," so the entire remains of the city could be seen as a monument of God's victory. Similar language occurs in the

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<sup>36</sup> Some might want to include the stone altars of 8:30-35 and 22:10 to my list, but it seems to me that the altars serve a different role than the monuments I mention here. Since it is not clear that any of these monuments doubled as altars, I see these as two separate categories.

<sup>37</sup> Hubbard, "What Do These Stones Mean?" 17.

<sup>38</sup> Joshua expected the Jordan stones to be "a memorial forever" (4:7). The other stone monuments "remain to this very day," suggesting a connection with the original monuments from Joshua 3-4.

<sup>39</sup> Ai was not miraculously defeated like Jericho was, but God does receive explicit credit for the victory (Joshua 8:18).

story of the battle at Gibeon. There, Israel faced a coalition of Canaanite armies which, humanly speaking, should have defeated them. God, however, fought for his people from heaven, giving them a miraculous victory (Joshua 10:12-14). After the kings of the Canaanites fled, Joshua tracked them to Makkedah. There, he executed them and buried them in a cave, blocking the entrance with “large stones...which remain to this very day” (Joshua 10:27). Again, this monument testified to God’s victory over Israel’s enemies and the fulfillment of his promises to be with them and give them the land.

Gardner believes the stone of witness (Joshua 24:26-27) serves a similar function. Abraham was at Shechem when God promised to give Canaan to his offspring (Genesis 12:6-7), and he had constructed an altar of thanksgiving there.<sup>40</sup> Joshua brought Israel to Shechem as a proof that God had fulfilled all his promises to them, defeating their enemies and giving them the land (Joshua 24:1-13; cf. 21:45). This monument, erected at the very place where Canaan had first been promised to Israel, stood to remind the people of God’s enduring covenant and to show the people that their champion had given them rest. If they turned from their covenant obligations to Yahweh, the stone of witness threatened that he would turn on them just as he had the Canaanites (Joshua 24:19-20). But, if they were loyal to their Lord, he would continue to act as their champion.<sup>41</sup> While the stones in the valley of Achor, Ai, and Makkedah commemorated specific military victories that Yahweh had won for his people, the stone of witness at Shechem symbolized God’s victory over all of Canaan by showing that the God of Abraham had faithfully given the land to Israel.

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<sup>40</sup> Gardner, “Joshua: ‘Sermon in Stones,’” 424-425.

<sup>41</sup> The book of Joshua reminds us that Israel’s true battle was against sin, not the Canaanites. God called the people to courageously do all that was written in the Torah (Joshua 1:7), and Joshua implied that not the Canaanites but instead their own evil hearts were their main adversaries moving forwards (Joshua 24:14-28).

Each stone monument above is associated with God's militaristic victories on behalf of Israel. The stone monument in the Jordan is no different. As already shown, Yahweh and Israel trampled on Yamm the serpent as they entered the land of Canaan. The stones in the Jordan are thus associated with Yahweh's victory over the false gods of Canaan. Joshua erected a monument in the Jordan so that coming generations of Israelites would remember that Yahweh had easily killed Yamm. If this is true, is not the monument at Gilgal redundant? To answer this question accurately, we should notice that God's work at Gilgal is not aimed against Canaan at all. Rather, in Joshua 5:9, Yahweh rather surprisingly said, "Today I have rolled away the reproach of *Egypt* from you" (emphasis mine). As much as Israel's entrance into Canaan marked the beginning of the conquest, it also marked the end of the wilderness wandering.<sup>42</sup> Throughout Israel's time in the wilderness, Egypt remained their main adversary. If Israel fell before reaching Canaan, the Egyptians could slander them by questioning their status as God's elect people. Moses was concerned the Egyptians would also call Yahweh's love and power into question (Exodus 32:12; Numbers 14:13).<sup>43</sup> When Israel finally entered Canaan, they were vindicated since it proved they really were God's people. God's reputation was also vindicated because Egypt could no longer doubt that he was powerful and faithful to do as he had said.<sup>44</sup>

It is therefore clear why Joshua 3-4 records the construction of two monuments. The story simultaneously shows God's victory over two hostile forces: Canaan's gods and Egypt. The monument in the Jordan symbolizes God's defeat of Yamm; the monument at Gilgal stands for Yahweh's final defeat of Egypt. In the wilderness, Israel had an "already, not-yet" victory over

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<sup>42</sup> See Jan A. Wagenaar, "Crossing the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 13-14) and the Jordan (Joshua 3-4): A priestly framework for the wilderness wandering" in *Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1996), 461-470.

<sup>43</sup> Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 102.

<sup>44</sup> Coleson, *Joshua*, 67.



Egypt, but, at Gilgal, that victory was finalized, and the stones of witness memorialized God's completed triumph. Contra source critics, the dual monuments in Joshua 4:1-10a make theological sense. Rather than indicating the presence of two separate traditions, the two stone memorials testify to the unity of Joshua 3-4, and to the theological unity of the whole book.

## **Conclusion**

The repetition in Joshua 3-4 testifies to the text's coherence and unity by giving the narrative a chiasmic structure. The phenomena often noted by source critics can be explained by referring either to (1) the text's structure or (2) its theological message. Joshua 3-4 recounts God's defeat of Yamm and anticipates Israel's subsequent defeat of the Canaanites. It also introduces readers to memorial stones, which serve as an important literary device throughout the book. Serving as reminders of God's faithfulness and victory, memorial stones aided the Israelites in teaching their children about the wondrous works of their God. At the Jordan, God performed two wondrous works, simultaneously bringing final defeat on the Egyptians while also judging the gods of Canaan. All this anticipates the work of Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman, who crushes the head of the serpent as he brings rest to his people.