

Joshua

Lesson #2

Crossing the Jordan River

(3: 1 – 5: 12)

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Review

At the end of Deuteronomy, Moses commissioned Joshua to lead the conquest of the Promised Land, and Moses himself climbed to the top of Mt. Nebo, gazed at the land and died.

As we entered the book of Joshua, the Israelites were staging for war and preparing to cross the Jordan River to attack Jericho. Joshua has very big shoes to fill, and he faces an extremely difficult job, leading the unruly Israelites as they invade Canaan, a mountainous land with fortified cities, peopled with seasoned warriors.

Jericho sits atop a plateau, overlooking the Jordan Valley. From Jericho to the Jordan River measures roughly 5 miles; the Jordan River to the mountains of Moab another 5 miles. The men of Jericho can watch every move the Israelites make, long before the Israelites get anywhere close to the city. There was no element of surprise.

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Review, cont.

Every battle commander needs good intelligence about the enemy: How many fighting men are there? What does the city look like inside? What are their defenses? What are their weaknesses? Joshua sent two spies into Jericho to find out.

What they discovered ensures that the city will fall!

Preview

The Jordan River begins at the snow-capped, 9,232 foot summit of the Mt. Hermon range, 110 miles north of Jericho (as the crow flies). Three major runoff streams form the upper Jordan River, which flows into the Sea of Galilee, 700 feet below sea level. From the Sea of Galilee the lower Jordan River flows south into the Dead Sea, 1,407 feet below sea level. Thus, the Jordan River drops 10,639 feet along its 156-mile length.

The Israelites cross the Jordan River during the April/May grain harvest, when *“the Jordan is at flood stage”* (Joshua 3: 15). This is hugely significant, for the river is roaring with Class-4 rapids!

How will the Israelites do this?



**Benjamin West. *The Children of Israel Crossing the Jordan River* (oil on wood), 1800.
Art Gallery of New South Wales.**

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Recall that the Israelites are camped on the plain of Moab, on the east side of the Jordan River. Jericho sits 5-7 miles away on the west side of the Jordan River.

As we noted in Lesson #1, the people of Jericho can see every move the Israelites make, allowing the Israelites no element of surprise.

But Joshua's spies brought back critical intel about the people of Jericho: they are quaking in fear of the Israelites and of their God.

Joshua will ratchet up that fear to a level of *sheer terror*—with a little help from God.

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We read in Joshua:



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“Early the next morning, Joshua and all the Israelites moved from Shittim and came to the Jordan, where they stayed before crossing over. Three days later the officers went through the camp and issued these commands to the people: ‘When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord, your God, which the levitical priests will carry, you must break camp and follow it, that you may know the way to take, for you have not gone over this road before. But let there be a space of two thousand cubits [1,000 yards] between you and the ark: do not come nearer to it.’ Joshua also said to the people, ‘Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will perform wonders among you.’ And he told the priests, ‘Take up the ark of the covenant and cross ahead of the people’; so they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people. Then the Lord said to Joshua: Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that . . .

. . . as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. Now command the priests carrying the ark of the covenant, 'When you come to the edge of the waters of the Jordan, there take your stand.' So Joshua said to the Israelites, 'Come here and listen to the words of the Lord, your God.' He continued: 'By this you will know that there is a living God in your midst: he will certainly dispossess before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites. The ark of the covenant of the Lord of the whole earth will cross the Jordan before you. Now choose twelve men, one from each of the tribes of Israel. When the soles of the feet of the priests carrying the ark of the Lord, the Lord of the whole earth, touch the waters of the Jordan, it will cease to flow; the water flowing down from upstream will halt in a single heap."

(3: 1-13)

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How in the world did the Jordan River suddenly stop flowing and pile up “in a single heap?”

To understand what happened, the magnitude of the event, and the affect it had on the people of Jericho, we need to understand the Jordan River itself.

The Jordan River begins at the snow-capped, 9,232 foot summit of the Mt. Hermon range, 110 miles north of Jericho. Three major runoff streams form the upper Jordan River—the Hasbani ,the Dan and the Banias Rivers—which flow into the Sea of Galilee, 700 feet below sea level. From the Sea of Galilee the lower Jordan River flows south into the Dead Sea, 1,407 feet *below* sea level. Thus, the Jordan River drops 10,639 feet along its 156-mile length.



← Mt. Hermon (9,232 feet)

Mt. Hermon to Sea of Galilee, 33 miles.

← Sea of Galilee (-700 feet)

← Yarmuk River

← Jabbok River

PLAIN OF MOAB

← Dead Sea (-1,407 feet)

JERICO



**Mt. Hermon on the Israel/Lebanon border, 33 miles north of the Sea of Galilee.
The mountain range stretches 50 miles!**

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Three major runoff streams from Mt. Hermon form the upper Jordan River: the Hasbani, the Dan and the Banias Rivers. This is the Hasbani River.

Photography by Adiel Lo

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This is the Dan River, with late-winter cascading rapids: fast moving and very loud!

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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**This is the Baniyas River at Caesarea Philippi, flowing out from beneath the cave.
In Jesus' day it gushed out of the cave itself.
This is where Peter's "confession of faith" took place.**

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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This is the Upper Jordan River, flowing south into the Sea of Galilee.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

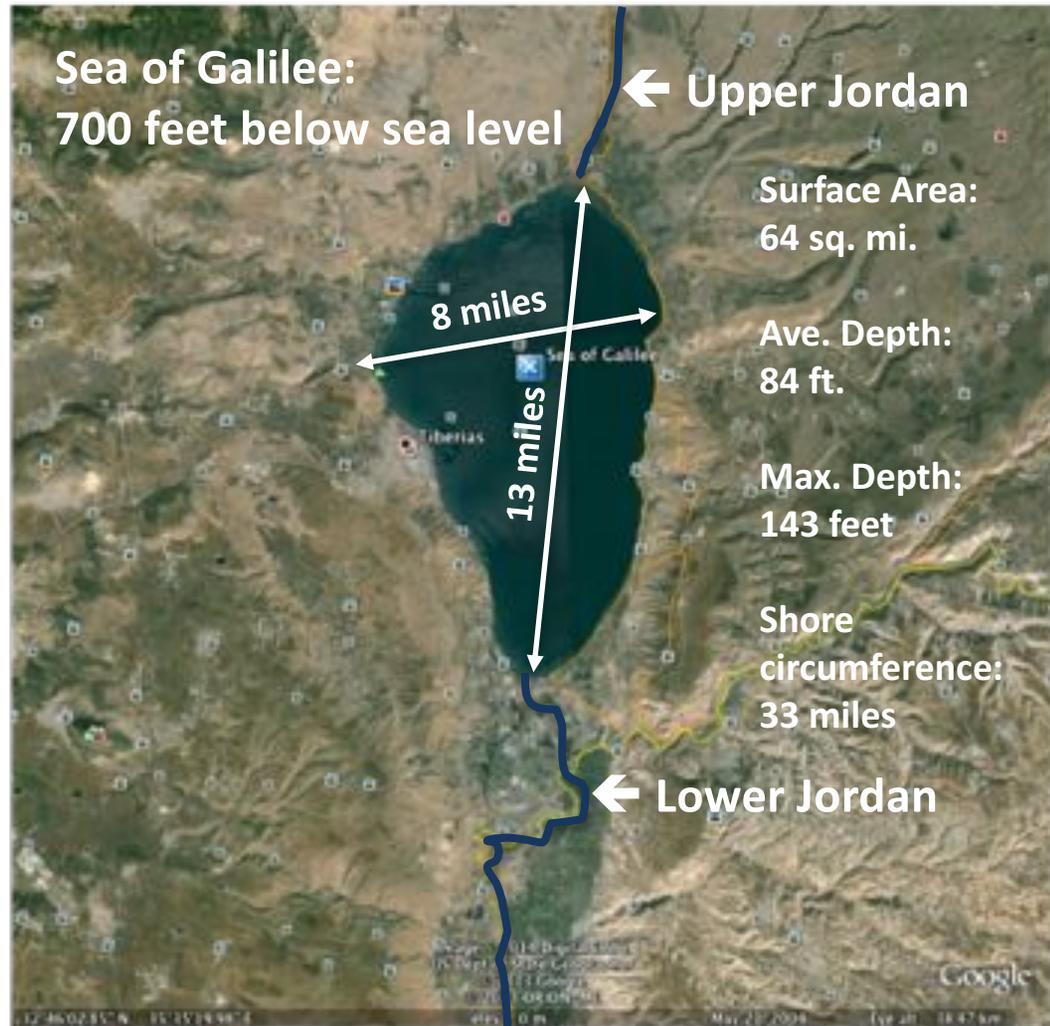
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Summer rafting on the upper Jordan River is great fun!

Photography by Itamar Grinberg

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Sea of Galilee:
700 feet below sea level

← Upper Jordan

Surface Area:
64 sq. mi.

Ave. Depth:
84 ft.

Max. Depth:
143 feet

Shore
circumference:
33 miles

← Lower Jordan



The Sea of Galilee from the Mount of Beatitudes.

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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Walking south at sunrise on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee.

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The Lower Jordan River as it exits the Sea of Galilee, flowing south.

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**The Lower Jordan River opposite Jericho.
We're standing on the east bank, in modern-day Jordan.
This is where John the Baptist baptized Jesus.**

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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From Mt. Nebo, opposite Jericho, looking south at the northern tip of the Dead Sea, where the Jordan River flows into it.

Photography by Ana Marie Vargas

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From Mount Nebo, opposite Jericho, looking south at the northern tip of the Dead Sea, where the Jordan River flows into it.

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As we noted, the upper Jordan River is formed by three major runoff streams from Mt. Hermon: the Hasbani, the Dan and the Banias Rivers. In addition, a vast network of underground springs also feed into the upper Jordan.

As the lower Jordan River flows south, both the Yarmuk River and the Jabbok River also flow into it from the eastern mountain range, swelling the lower Jordan greatly.

Today, a dam at the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee controls water flow into the lower Jordan River, and the lower Jordan is tapped for agricultural purposes, both by Israel and Jordan. Consequently, the Jordan's flow opposite Jericho is often but a trickle today.

That was not true during Joshua's day.



In Joshua's day, during the April/May grain harvest, "*when the Jordan is at flood stage*" (Joshua 3: 15), the lower Jordan was raging with Class 4 rapids!

Imagine the people of Jericho watching from the fortified walls of the city, as the Israelites approach the roaring river, the march led by four priests carrying the golden Ark of the Covenant, glistening in the sunlight.



Jean Fouquet. "Battle of Jericho," from the *Hours of Etienne Chevalier* (illuminated manuscript), c.1460. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

“The people set out from their tents to cross the Jordan, with the priests carrying the ark of the covenant ahead of them. When those bearing the ark came to the Jordan and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were immersed in the waters of the Jordan—which overflows all its banks during the entire season of the harvest—the waters flowing from upstream halted, standing up in a single heap for a very great distance indeed, from Adam, a city in the direction of Zarethan; those flowing downstream toward the Salt Sea of the Arabah disappeared entirely. Thus the people crossed over opposite Jericho. The priests carrying the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the Jordan riverbed while all Israel crossed on dry ground, until the whole nation had completed the crossing of the Jordan.”

(3: 14-17)



Juan Montero de Rojas. *The Ark of the Covenant Crossing the Jordan* (oil on canvas), c. 1667-1668. Prado Museum, Madrid.



This requires some explanation!

“The waters flowing from upstream halted, standing up in a single heap for a very great distance indeed, from Adam, a city in the direction of Zarethan; those flowing downstream toward the Salt Sea of the Arabah [the Dead Sea] disappeared entirely.”

(3: 16)

Adam [Tel ed-Damiyeh] is 18 miles north of Jericho on the east side of the Jordan River, where the Jabbok River flows into the Jordan. At this spot the inner gorge of the Jordan is narrow, with high banks.

Discussion of the Jordan piling up “in a single heap” typically stresses the miraculous nature of the event, or it is poo-pooed out of hand as purely fictional.



Crossing the Jordan River



But there may be a more reasonable explanation. In an excellent article,¹ Brian G. Wood writes:

“Historians and Bible scholars have focused on the ‘miraculous’ nature of the event, with little regard for the seismology of the southern Jordan Valley. In fact, the blocking of the Jordan has happened a number of times in recent recorded history. Jericho is located in the Rift Valley, an unstable region where earthquakes are frequent. Geophysicist Amos Nur of Stanford University has studied the well-documented earthquakes of this area in an effort to find ways to predict them. He has noted several earthquakes that caused phenomena quite similar to what is described in the Book of Joshua:

‘Today Adam is Damiya, the site of the 1927 mud slides that cut off the flow of the Jordan. Such cutoffs, typically lasting one to two days, have also been recorded in A.D. 1906, 1834, 1546, 1267, and 1160.’”

¹ See Wood’s complete article, “Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho? A New Look at the Archaeological Evidence,” (May, 2008): <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/05/Did-the-Israelites-Conquer-Jericho-A-New-Look-at-the-Archaeological-Evidence.aspx#Article>.



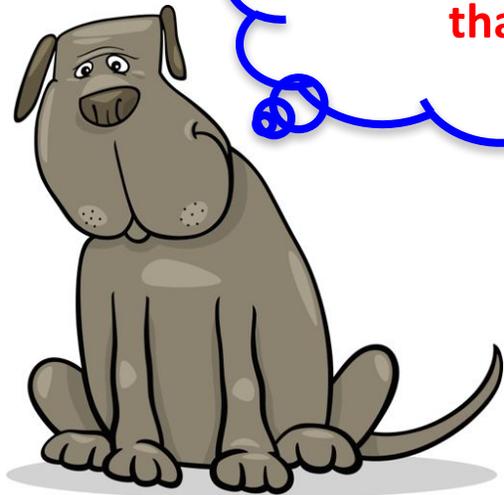
In addition, Wood continues:

“The 1267 C.E. mudslide was recorded by the Arab historian Nowairi. He writes that a large mound on the west side of the Jordan at Damiya fell into the river damming it up. No water flowed south from Damiya for 16 hours. In the 1927 quake, a section of a cliff 150 feet high collapsed into the Jordan near the ford at Damiya, blocking the river for some 21 hours.”²

² Wood is here quoting: John Garstang, *Joshua, Judges* (reprinted Grand Rapids , MI: Kregel, 1978), pp. 136-137.



So, there may well have been an earthquake that caused the Jordan River to be blocked at Adam. And if that happened, the earthquake may have also damaged the walls of Jericho, making them unstable, setting up how the Israelites will take the city.

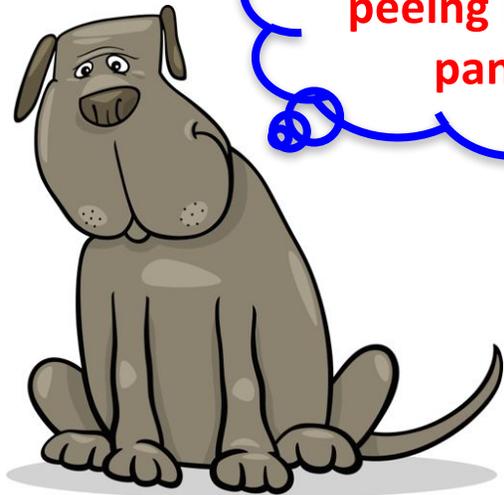


I hadn't thought of that!

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And that's not all. If, indeed, that's what happened--either historically or within the literary world of the narrative--the people of Jericho, who are already terrified of the Israelites and of their God, must be catatonic with fear!



I'll bet they're peeing in their pants!



I can't believe you just said that!



After the Israelites cross over the Jordan, Joshua orders that the priests *“take up twelve stones from [the] spot in the Jordan riverbed where the priests have been standing”* (4: 3). These stones will become markers, reminding future generations of the Israelites’ extraordinary crossing.

And then we read something alarming!

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“The priests carrying the ark stood in the Jordan riverbed until everything had been done that the Lord had commanded Joshua to tell the people, just as Moses had commanded Joshua. The people crossed over quickly, and when all the people had completed the crossing, the ark of the Lord also crossed; and the priests were now in front of them. The Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh, armed, marched in the vanguard of the Israelites, as Moses had ordered. About **forty thousand troops**, equipped for battle, crossed over before the Lord to the plains of Jericho for war.”

(4: 10-13)



Remember the deal struck between Moses and the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh?

We read about it in Numbers 32.

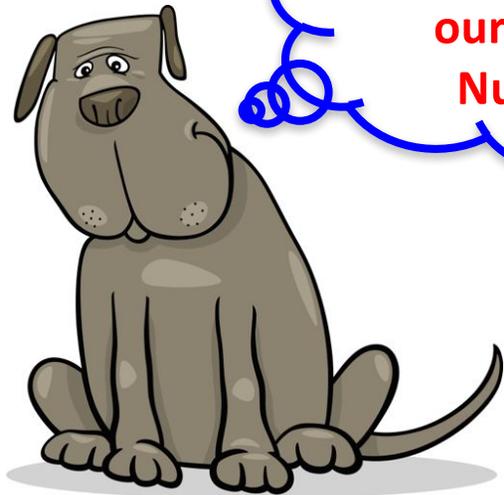
“If you do this—if you march as troops before the Lord into battle and cross the Jordan **in full force** before the Lord until he has driven his enemies out of his way and the land is subdued before the Lord, then you may return here [to the east side of the Jordan], free from every obligation to the Lord and to Israel, and this land will be your possession before the Lord. But if you do not do this, you will have sinned against the Lord, and you can be sure that the consequences of your sin will overtake you. Build the towns, then, for your families, and folds for your flocks, but fulfill what you have promised . . . The Gadites and Reubenites answered Moses, ‘Your servants will do as my lord commands. While our wives and children, our livestock and other animals remain there in the towns of Gilead, **all your servants will go across** as armed troops before the Lord to battle, just as my lord says.”

(32: 20-27)

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I remember that. And I also remember that we counted the Israelite fighting men on the plain of Moab, shortly before Moses died. How many were there in the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh?



Let's look at the chart we built in our study of Numbers!

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The 2nd Census

<u>Tribe</u>	<u>1st Census</u>	<u>2nd Census</u>	<u>Difference</u>
Reuben	46,500	43,730	2,770
Simeon	59,300	22,200	37,100
Judah	74,600	76,500	1,900
Issachar	54,400	64,300	9,900
Zebulun	57,400	60,500	3,100
Ephraim	40,500	32,500	8,000
Manasseh	32,200	52,700	20,500
Benjamin	35,400	45,600	10,200
Dan	62,700	64,400	1,700
Asher	41,500	53,400	11,900
Gad	45,650	40,500	5,150
Naphtali	<u>53,400</u>	<u>45,400</u>	<u>8,000</u>
Total	603,550	601,730	1,820



How many Gadites, Reubenites and half of Manasseh crossed over the Jordan for combat? We just read in Joshua 4: 13, about 40,000.

How many fighting men did the Gadites, Reubenites and half of Manasseh have? 110,580.

Only 1/3 (36%) of the trans-Jordanian tribes actually made the crossing!

So, vows are broken and compromise begins.

And what is the result?



If we move up to New Testament times we discover the result in Matthew 8: 28-34 . . .

“When he [Jesus] came to the other side, to the territory of the Gaderenes, two demoniacs who were coming from the tombs met him. They were so savage that no one could travel by that road. They cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the appointed time?’ Some distance away a herd of many swine was feeding. The demons pleaded with him, ‘If you drive us out, send us into the herd of swine.’ And he said to them, ‘Go then!’ They came out and entered the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea where they drowned. The swineherds ran away, and when they came to the town they reported everything, including what had happened to the demoniacs. Thereupon the whole town came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him they begged him to leave their district.”



**Yikes! That's the
first mention in
Scripture of
"deviled ham"!**

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Gadara, one of the ten “Decapolis” cities, lay about 5 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee.

Our 1st-century historian Josephus writes:

“. . . he went out with all these and kindled the villages of both Gadara and Hippos, which indeed chanced to lie on the borders of Tiberias and Sycharopolis.”

(Life, IX, 42)

The territory of Gadara had several outlying villages along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Healing of the Gadarene Dementiac



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Archaeological remains of Gadara at the high point of the city, near the western theater.

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**“Healing of the Gadarene Demoniacs” (wall fresco), c. 1350.
Monastery of Dečani, Kosovo.**

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The Gaderines were of the tribe of Gad, descendants of those who broke their vow to God and their promise to Moses, those who compromised, with no intention of keeping their word.

1,500 years later we see the result: the Decapolis were ten Greco-Roman cities, nine of which were on the “other side”—the east side of the Jordan River and the Sea of Galilee; the Gaderines were Jewish pig farmers, subservient to the Gentiles; and the man living in the tombs was stark-raving mad and crawling with demons.

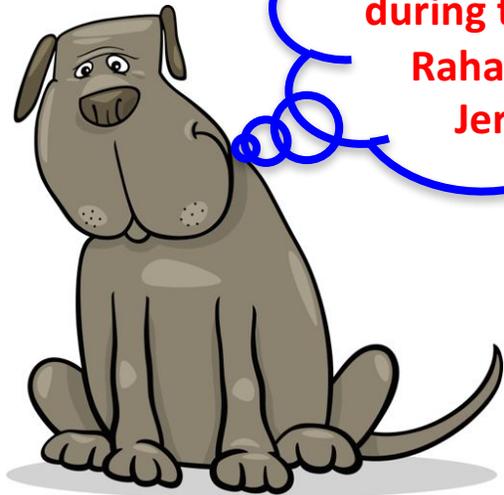
That was the ultimate price of compromise.

“When all the kings of the Amorites to the west of the Jordan and all the kings of the Canaanites by the sea heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the Israelites until they crossed over, their hearts melted and they were utterly dispirited because of the Israelites.”

(5: 1)



When the spies told Joshua that the people of Jericho were terrified of the Israelites, that was the key to defeating them. Now, crossing of the Jordan River on dry ground—preceded, perhaps, by a massive earthquake—that escalated their terror to a fever pitch.



And it's such a clear parallel to God parting the Red Sea during the Exodus, something Rahab said the people of Jericho knew about.

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The Israelites are in a really good position to attack!

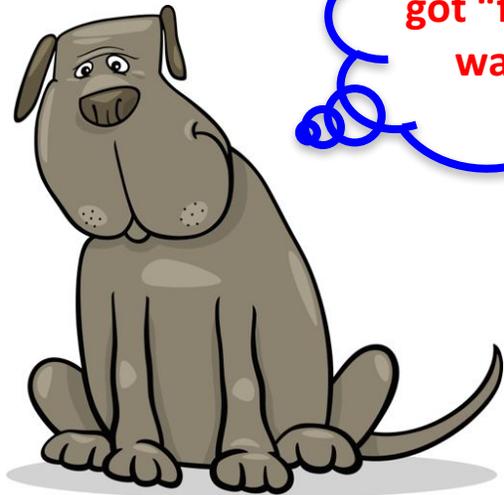
But then the Lord said to Joshua:

“Make flint knives and circumcise Israel for the second time. So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth. This was the reason for the circumcision: Of all the people who had come out of Egypt, every male of military age had died in the wilderness during the journey after they came out of Egypt. Though all the men who came out were circumcised, none of those born in the wilderness during the journey after the departure from Egypt were circumcised.”

(5: 2b-5)

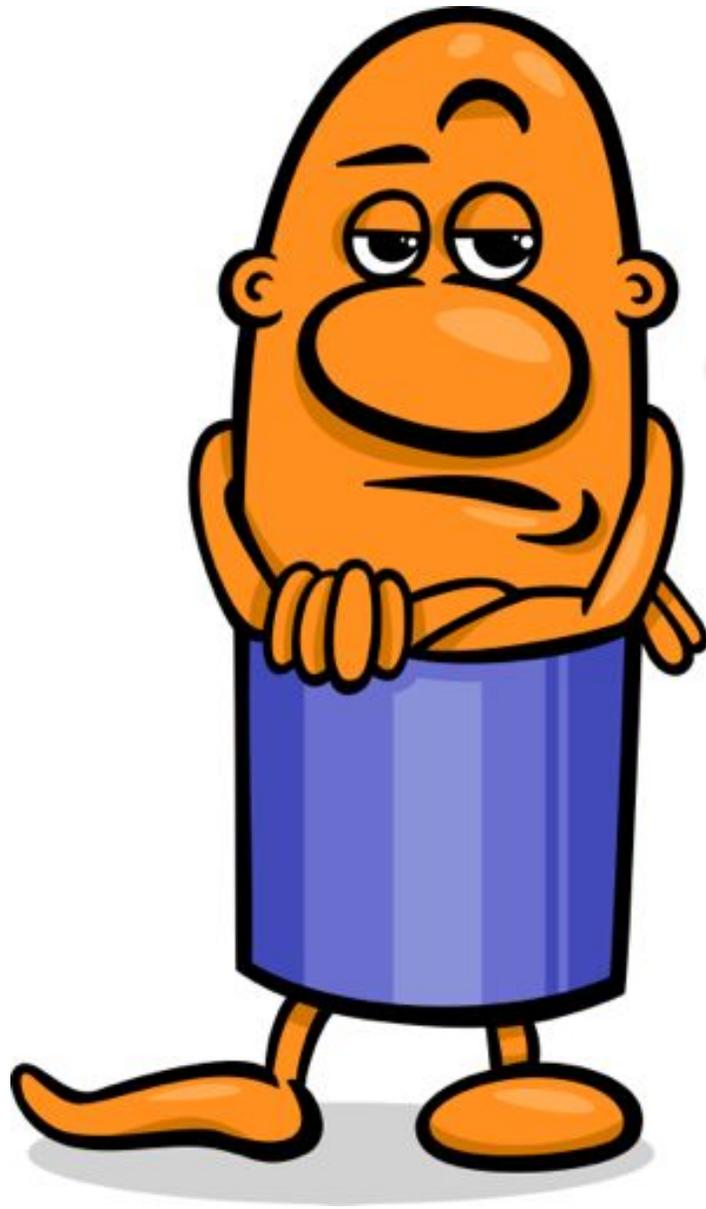


Holy cow! That could be a critical mistake! Remember what happened in the story of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34? When the men of Shechem were all circumcised and “were still in pain” (34: 25), Jacob’s sons attacked and slaughtered them all. This is the perfect time for the men of Jericho to attack the Israelites!



I remember when I got “fixed.” I couldn’t walk for a week!

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I wonder if they'll figure that out? We'll have to leave you on a cliff hanger!

Questions for discussion and thought

1. What critical intel do the spies bring back that ensures Israelite victory at Jericho?
2. How does our story create a sense of drama as the Israelites prepare to cross the Jordan River?
3. Whether an historical event or a literary construct, crossing the Jordan River at flood season has dramatic impact. How do the people of Jericho react in our story?
4. We are told very subtly that about 40,000 troops from Gad, Reuben and half of Manasseh cross the Jordan. Why is the specific number slipped in?
5. Why does God order that the Israelite men be circumcised before the attack on Jericho?

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