

Joshua 4:1-24

Two Sets of Twelve Stones

Joshua 4:1-3 - "And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over Jordan, that the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying,"

"the LORD spake unto Joshua" - This brings up one more word on guidance in the Promised Land:

Last week we noticed that the pillar of cloud and fire had ceased as beacons of guidance, and Israel now was to follow the Ark, which would go forward ahead of them at the word of Joshua.

Here in verse 1 we see that "the Lord spake unto Joshua." This word seems to come to Joshua directly because of the complexity of the command. But this command about the stones had already been given to Moses in **Deuteronomy 27:2-5** (see below) so this could have just been a "go ahead" sign from God.

There was an earlier specific command that Joshua should seek God's will by standing before the High Priest, who would then consult the Lord by means of the Urim and Thummim.

- **Numbers 27:21** - "And he (Joshua) shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the LORD: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation."

Rashi - "...even Joshua will have need for Eleazar". — [Mid. Tanchuma Pinchas 11]

The phrase "at his word" is not clear about who it refers to. It probably means the directive came from The Lord, through the High Priest - possibly by consulting the Urim and Thummim while standing in the Holy Place just outside of the Holy of Holies where the Shekhinah glory still rested on the Ark, then on to Joshua, and then to the priests who would bear the Ark. Israel, by following the Ark, was really following all of them.

This suggests an agreement between multiple witnesses.

"Going out" usually meant a decision to go to war, but other important decisions were included.

Rashi and others say that, although unstated, Eleazar used the Urim and Thummim and Joshua followed its revelation by tossing lots in the division of the land among the tribes. When both disclosed identical information, the Israelites were convinced that God was communicating with them.

(Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 122a)

The Urim and Thummim were the "lights and perfections" indicating perfect guidance by means of the priest's breastplate - a pouch inlaid with 12 precious stones engraved with the names of the 12 tribes of Israel - which was called "the breastpiece of decision." Only priests speaking by means of the holy spirit and upon whom the Shekhinah rested could invoke them. It was used for indicating which of two alternatives was right. It is not clear exactly how this worked, but the Urim and Thummim were engaged whenever there was doubt - generally a question would be asked, and a yes or no answer indicated.

For instance, in 1 Samuel 14:41, Saul asks, "If the guilt be in me or in my son Jonathan. O YHWH God of Israel, give Urim (הַבָּה אֲוֹרִים). But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim (הַבָּה תְּמִים)."

According to Rashi, the Urim and Thummim contained the Tetragrammaton, the secret name of God, insuring the clarity and accuracy of the oracle. Tradition says the Urim and Thummim ceased to give oracular answers immediately after the death of the first prophets (Sot. 9:12), i.e., at the destruction of the First Temple (Sot. 48b). However according to the Jerusalem Talmud (Sot. 9:14, 24b), the "first prophets" refers to Samuel and David ("bring me the ephod" - **1 Samuel 30:7**) who was the type of the Messiah. So according to this view the Urim and Thummim did not function during the First Temple period either. Josephus gives a different date, saying their oracular power ceased 200 years before his time (Ant. 3:218).

What does this mean concerning our guidance today?

The mention of Eleazar reminds us that the priests as well as all the Levites had responsibility for teaching Torah.

- **Leviticus 10:11** - "...that ye may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD hath spoken unto them by the hand of Moses."

- **Malachi 2:7** - "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts."

For us, the image of Joshua inquiring through the High Priest through the Urim and Thummim implies that the guidance of the Holy Spirit and of Jesus/Joshua within us should also align with Torah and the scriptures. When those align, Israel can go forward and, as Peter says, we can speak confidently "as the oracles of God" (**1 Peter 4:11**).

The Greek word Peter uses for "oracle" here - *logion* - means a little or brief word, and is the same word used by the Septuagint to translate the word for the High Priest's breastplate, which contained the Urim and Thummim. The early church used the same word to describe the sayings of Christ. Practically this means if the Spirit and the scriptures agree, we can confidently speak knowing God is using us.

Be aware that sometimes, when consulted, the Urim and Thummim were silent

(consider Saul in **1 Samuel 28:6**) The Urim and Thummim ceased because we now have a "more sure word of prophecy" and God has "spoken unto us by his Son" (**Hebrews 1:2**) in Christ, in whom we reside, and who embodies the Word of God (**2 Peter 1:19**).

Jesus personifies the "lights and perfections" of the Urim and Thummim.

- **John 8:12** - "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

The Shepherd as Guide in Our 'Going Out' and 'Coming In'

"Going out and coming in" or "leading out and bringing in" is really the language of a shepherd herding his sheep. God promises to lead us into green pastures (**Psalms 23**). Jesus is the Good Shepherd (**John 10:11**).

- **John 10:27** - "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me."

By Two or Three Witnesses is a Thing Established

- **Matthew 18:16** - "...in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established"

- **2 Corinthians 13:1** - "...In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established."

The Law required two or three witnesses to convict for a capital offense (**Deuteronomy 19:15**). Jesus said where two or three are gathered together in His name, He is there in their midst (**Matthew 18:20**).

- **Proverbs 15:22** - "Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counselors they are established." - **Proverbs 11:14** and **24:6** repeat this idea.

This adds in another element in guidance - the counsel of the church, whether by elders or other brothers and sisters in the community of faith, who are there to exhort, comfort and encourage us.

And finally, guidance should never harden into a vow. Humility requires the ability to admit we were wrong.

- **James 4:15** - "...ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that."

Ultimately, by following Jesus, the path always leads the cross.

Stones Taken from the Jordan

Joshua 4:2-3 - "Take you twelve men out of the people, out of every tribe a man, And command ye them, saying, Take you hence out of the midst of Jordan, out of the place where the priests' feet stood firm, twelve stones, and ye shall carry them over with you, and leave them in the lodging place, where ye shall lodge this night."

These twelve (**Joshua 3:17**) would be left with Joshua on the east bank of the river, waiting to receive his orders after the rest of the people had made their way across.

Joshua then turns around and relays this to those 12 men, with the added instruction to "take up every man of you a stone upon his shoulder" (**Joshua 4:5**) meaning these were large river rocks.

The men collected them and placed them at the new camp at Gilgal.

Joshua 4:7 - "That this may be a sign among you, that when your children ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean ye by these stones? Then ye shall answer them, That the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it passed over Jordan, the waters of Jordan were cut off: and these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel for ever."

There is an important earlier command about setting up stones:

- **Deuteronomy 27:2-3** - "And it shall be on the day when ye shall pass over Jordan unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, that thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaister them with plaister: And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over, that thou mayest go in unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee."

But in Deuteronomy Israel is told to set up the stones near Mount Ebal (not Gilgal), and also to build an altar there.

- **Deuteronomy 27:4-5** - "Therefore it shall be when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaister them with plaister. And there shalt thou build an altar unto the LORD thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them."

And it seems like they were to inscribe the Law onto the stones at Ebal, or even possibly on the stones of the altar itself.

- **Deuteronomy 27:6-8** - "Thou shalt build the altar of the LORD thy God of whole stones: and thou shalt offer burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD thy God: And thou shalt offer peace offerings, and shalt eat there, and rejoice before the LORD thy God. And thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law very plainly.

Midrash on the 12 Tablets

Because the meaning of the text is obscure, there are elaborate rabbinical stories about this:

One tradition says Joshua did not permit Israel to reach the west bank of the Jordan until finishing the monumental task of inscribing the Torah upon the tablets of stone. They paused mid-crossing and completed the entire inscription, as the Jordan's waters were miraculously held at bay (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 36a).

The tablets were said to be roughly eighteen inches wide and four-and-a-half feet high (Sotah 34a). Ramban (on **Deuteronomy 27:3**) states that fitting the entire text on twelve tablets of that size was nothing short of miraculous.

The Talmud taught that the entire biblical text was inscribed upon the tablets (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 35b). Rabbi Saadiah Gaon taught that only the 613 commandments were inscribed. The Talmud held that it was inscribed in all seventy languages of the day (although at least one Midrashic source indicates that it was inscribed only in Hebrew). This was so that the nations would understand why God gave the land to the Jews. The Talmud points out that the neighboring tribes sent scribes to transcribe the text from the tablets, but the tribes refused to accept these teaching and were therefore punished.

Rabbi Shimon held that the letters were inscribed on top of the plaster. This is because Joshua did not intend to leave the tablets as a permanent monument. In fact, lifeless monuments are anathema to Israel. He chose to inscribe the letters upon lime because lime does not withstand the elements as stone does, and would fade.

Rabbi Yehudah held an alternate view, that the letters were inscribed into the stone and a coat of lime was plastered over them, covering the words. If the intention was to display the Torah's teachings to all mankind then why were the letters, according to Rabbi Yehudah, concealed by a coat of lime? Because the Torah cannot be mastered out of idle curiosity. Torah study must be fueled by an intense desire for closeness with God. Forcing readers to chip away at the coat of lime before reading the text deterred the idle curious, but fortified the sincere seekers.

(See https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/418961/jewish/The-Stones-in-the-River.htm)

Twelve More Stones Set Up In the Jordan

Joshua 4:9 - "And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests which bare the ark of the covenant stood: and they are there unto this day."

The LXX uses Gk. *állous* [another] here to indicate that these stones were indeed different from those already mentioned.

There were two memorials, one on the bank, one in the stream. Why?

The stones placed in the river are mysterious, and commentators disagree on their meaning.

Meaning of the Stones

The 12 stones inscribed with the Law placed at Gilgal represent the Law literally written on the land itself. It is a type of the new covenant written on our hearts (the land, us as an earthen vessel) - on Israel. Moses could not complete this. Only Joshua/Jesus could.

Members of the body of Christ are referred to by Peter as "living stones" placed together to form the spiritual temple (**1 Peter 2:5**). Peter's name even means "rock."

The River Jordan here represents the waters of judgment. "Jordan" means both "descender" and also "the spread of judgment": *yar* = "spread" *dan*="judgment." Water it is a common picture of judgment in the Bible.

- **Hosea 5:10** - "...I will pour out my wrath on them like water"

- **Psalm 69:14,15** - "Deliver me out of the mire, And let me not sink; Let me be delivered from those who hate me, And out of the deep waters. Let not the floodwater overflow me, Nor let the deep swallow me up; And let not the pit shut its mouth on me."

This is why disciples we pull men out of the waters as "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). The 12 stones were actually pulled from the mire of the riverbed and brought to shore.

This is a baptism after all - like the Red Sea and Noah's flood. A picture of accepting our death, and emerging on the other side into a new life.

The stones placed in the river where the priests bore the Ark represent those who MIGHT have belonged to Israel, but do not follow Joshua/Jesus and the Ark with the Mercy Seat, who never make it to the other side, and are ultimately covered over with the waters of judgment. "And they are there to this day" (**Joshua 4:9**) i.e. never seen, and forgotten - along the lines of the command to remember to forget Amalek" (**Deuteronomy 25:19**).

Specifically the stones at Gilgal were a sign to Israel of encouragement at God's miracle of redemption. The other 12 stones in the river were a warning - there is judgment for rebellion and disobedience.

Joshua 4:10 - "For the priests which bare the ark stood in the midst of Jordan, until every thing was finished that the LORD commanded Joshua to speak unto the people, according to all that Moses commanded Joshua: and the people hastened and passed over."

Rashi - "until every thing was finished" - While they were still standing in the river bed

of the Jordan, Joshua said to them: Know for what purpose you are crossing the Jordan: On the condition that you drive out all the inhabitants of the land.

This probably refers to the promise and command of **Deuteronomy 11:23-25** - "Then will the LORD drive out all these nations from before you, and ye shall possess greater nations and mightier than yourselves. Every place whereon the soles of your feet shall tread shall be yours: from the wilderness and Lebanon, from the river, the river Euphrates, even unto the uttermost sea shall your coast be. There shall no man be able to stand before you: for the LORD your God shall lay the fear of you and the dread of you upon all the land that ye shall tread upon, as he hath said unto you."

Joshua 4:11 -- "And it came to pass, when all the people were clean passed over, that the ark of the LORD passed over, and the priests, in the presence of the people."

The Septuagint version adds, "and the stones before them."

Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh

Joshua 4:12-13 - "And the children of Reuben, and the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, passed over armed before the children of Israel, as Moses spake unto them: About forty thousand prepared for war passed over before the LORD unto battle, to the plains of Jericho."

Joshua Magnified

Joshua 4:14 - "On that day the LORD magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared him, as they feared Moses, all the days of his life."

It was at this same point at the Jordan where Jesus was baptized and the Father "magnified Him:

- **Matthew 3:17** - "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

The Crossing of the Ark

Joshua 4:15-18 - "And the LORD spake unto Joshua, saying, Command the priests that bear the ark of the testimony, that they come up out of Jordan. Joshua therefore commanded the priests, saying, Come ye up out of Jordan. And it came to pass, when the priests that bare the ark of the covenant of the LORD were come up out of the midst of Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up unto the dry land, that the waters of Jordan returned unto their place, and flowed over all his banks, as they did before.

"Ark of the testimony" here is the same idea as the Ark of the Covenant elsewhere. It

contained the tablets of the Law.

Because of a discrepancy in the account, Rashi has a curious explanation:

Rashi - the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up backwards to the dry land on the [east] bank from which they had entered, beside which they were standing, and the waters returned backwards to flow as it had done heretofore. Hence, the Ark and its bearers are found to be on one side, and all Israel on the other side. The Ark then picked up its bearers and passed over. And concerning this matter, Uzzah was punished when he took hold of the Ark (**1 Chronicles 13:9**). If it bore its bearers, [at the Jordan] can it not be deduced by *a fortiori* conclusion that it can bear itself?

Joshua 4:19-20 - "And the people came up out of Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and encamped in Gilgal, in the east border of Jericho. And those twelve stones, which they took out of Jordan, did Joshua pitch in Gilgal."

Gilgal means "circle" or "wheel" or "circles of stones" and gets its name from the 12 stones set up there. In **Joshua 5:9** it means "rolling":

- **Joshua 5:9** - "And the Lord said unto Joshua, This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you. Wherefore the name of the place is called Gilgal unto this day."

The 10th of Nisan is when the Passover lamb is taken by each household and kept until the 14th, when Israel would celebrate the first Passover in the Promised Land (**Joshua 5:10**)

'What Mean These Stones?'

Joshua 4:21-24 - "And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones? Then ye shall let your children know, saying, Israel came over this Jordan on dry land. For the LORD your God dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until ye were passed over, as the LORD your God did to the Red sea, which he dried up from before us, until we were gone over: That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty: that ye might fear the LORD your God for ever."

This is similar to the four questions the children ask during the passover seder.

- **Exodus 12:26-27** - "And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What mean ye by this service? That ye shall say, It is the sacrifice of the LORD'S passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. And the people bowed the head and worshipped."

In fact, these two miracles - the parting of the Red Sea and of the Jordan, are mentioned together in the Hallel:

- **Psalm 114:1-5** - "When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion. The sea saw it, and fled: Jordan was driven back. The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs. What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest? thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back?"

When unbelievers see the fruit of the Law fulfilled and written on our hearts, as we accept our death at the cross, in baptism in the Jordan, and the new life planted in the Resting Place represented by the Promised Land, it will be "a sign among us" and to others, and our prayer is that all will "know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty: that we (and they) might fear the LORD your God for ever."