Joshua vs. the River

November 1, 2026 © Scott McAndless – Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Joshua 3:7-17, Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37, 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13, Matthew 23:1-12

Did you know that there are two key figures named Joshua in the Bible who led the people of Israel into the land of Israel from the East to occupy it? It happened in the time of Joshua son of Nun when the people came from Egypt. And it happened again something like nine centuries later when the people of Judah returned from exile in Babylon under the leadership of a High Priest named Joshua.

The character of Joshua son of Nun (let's call him Joshua the Conqueror) may have been known before the time of Joshua the Priest, but the story of how the conqueror entered the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River was likely not written down until after the time of the Priest Joshua.

So, what if the story as we have it in the Book of Joshua was first told by the Priest Joshua or by his supporters? And what if they told it as they prepared their own entry into the land? How might their experience have shaped way that they told the story?

Cyrus the Great

In the year 539 BC, Cyrus the Great, ruler of Persia, conquered Babylon, establishing his Empire as the greatest the world had ever known.

The Babylonians had been cruel rulers who conquered and took whole peoples as tribute. When they had destroyed the Kingdom of Judah, for example, they had displaced all of its leading citizens, forcing them to live as exiles in Babylon.

But Cyrus had a different policy. He believed that, as long as they were peaceful and supported his rule, people should be able to live in their own lands and worship their own gods. And so, Cyrus decreed that the Jews, among others, should be allowed to return to their land and rebuild the temple that the Babylonians had destroyed.

Can you imagine the joy, the wonder and awe those exiles felt? This was a miracle and a fulfillment of prophecy. They even hailed King Cyrus, this pagan king who had made all of it possible, as God's chosen Messiah. (Isaiah 45:1)

The Return

The very first Jews who set out to reclaim their homeland were a small group – maybe a couple of thousand. But they had two illustrious leaders. They were led by Zerubbabel, the grandson of the second last king of Judah and a descendant of King David. And they were led by Joshua, heir of the ancient priests of the Jerusalem temple.

The Persians had even given the sacred objects that had been plundered from the Jerusalem temple by the Babylonians when they had destroyed it back to the people of Judah. These had been packed in a box and were carried by Joshua and the priests at the head of the joyous procession.



And I want you to imagine yourself joining that throng for that long and dangerous journey. As you go, you sing the song that is preserved in the 126th Psalm: **"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,"** you sing, **"we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongue with shouts of joy."**

The River

After a difficult journey of many weeks, you finally arrive at the borders of the land at the Jordan River, not far from the ancient city of Jericho. You have heard of this place from your parents and grandparents. Everyone knows that there is a ford here. It is the only place to cross the river for miles. Most of the time, that is.

But this is harvest time when the waters of the River Jordan run very high. So, as you look across, you see clearly that the water is too high. It is flowing so swiftly that if anyone dared to step in, they would surely be swept away.

Despair

You feel despair sweep through the whole group. You have come all this way, risking everything, just to walk again in the land of your ancestors. And the land is right there, just on the other side of the river. You can see it all laid out before you. But the path ahead is impossible; the promise is deferred today, and who knows, maybe forever.

The day is late, and the whole dejected company is ordered to make camp. Nothing will happen until morning. You all separate into your families and clans, each one building a fire to prepare an evening meal.

A Visitor

As evening falls, everyone is talking and sharing their feelings of disappointment. Each campfire is approached by someone. The visitors are all members of a priestly family – all related to the High Priest Joshua in some way. As they arrive, they are welcomed warmly and offered a share in the family's dinner.

The priest listens to the company's complaints for a while, but eventually he offers to tell them a story that might give them encouragement on this gloomy night. Well, no Israelite ever turned down a good story, so everyone leans forward and listens eagerly. So it is that around every fire spread throughout the Hebrew camp, the same story is told.

An Exodus from Egypt

"A long, long time ago," the priest begins, "our people had been slaves to another empire, one even more powerful than Babylon – to Pharaoh of Egypt. But, with plagues and miracles, our God brought us out and made us free, just as God has done again today by moving the heart of his chosen Messiah, Cyrus the Persian.

"And our people left Egyptian slavery behind. After a long journey, even longer than the one that you have made, they came to this very place. They, like us, were ready to cross the river and enter into the land. But, like today, it was harvest time. The river was in flood, and the people despaired.

The First Joshua

"They were led, in those days, by a great and heroic leader named Joshua – that's right, Joshua, just like our own High Priest. Joshua told the people not to despair. He said they should make camp and rest for, on the morrow, God would show them wonders.

"And in the morning, the people rose from their beds and behold, they saw that the priests were dressed all in white. They bore upon their shoulders the Ark of the Covenant, the very sign and symbol of God's presence with the people.

The Miracle

"And Joshua ordered all of the people to form up in their tribes and to follow the ark. The priests led the people to the edge of the stream and, as they watched, a great wonder took place. As soon as the feet of the ones who carried the ark touched the water, it ceased to flow. Far off in the north, many miles upstream, the water was stopped and, if anyone had gone there, they would have seen a great heap of water piled up.

"The bed of the mighty Jordan River ran dry that day and the people crossed over in safety. That is the kind of God that we serve, who can turn the mighty waters into dry land!

"This is the God who brought you here. Do not think that such a God can do nothing against a river in flood. Go and rest now, for when the morning comes, I think that you will see wonders the like of which have not been known since days of old."

It was a great story, and it sent many of the young people off to dream of incredible wonders. But others doubted. Surely God would not perform such wonders for the likes of them.

Cyrus' Bold Plan

No one had believed Cyrus the Persian could defeat the great City of Babylon. It was surrounded on three sides by walls so massive that no army could possibly breach them. On the fourth side was the mighty Euphrates River, the greatest river in all the world after the Nile of Egypt. No one could cross that.

But take the city Cyrus did. And he accomplished it in a way that no one had ever dreamt of before. He did not sacrifice thousands of soldiers to try and storm the impregnable walls. Instead, he quietly sent a corps of his best engineers upstream to a secluded spot. There they went to work to build a temporary dam to divert the river into the nearby marshy plain.

When, far out of the view of the city, the engineers finally threw the last piece of their dam in place, the water that flowed along the west side of the city suddenly stopped. The Persian army immediately attacked across the dry riverbed, and the great City of Babylon, taken by surprise, fell.

And there were Jews living there in exile in Babylon. They had no love for the Babylonians, and they saw Cyrus as their liberator, their Messiah. We know that some of them were living upstream from the city. I wonder. Did they see what the Persians did to the river?

And could it be that there was a priest named Joshua among those who saw what the Persian engineers did? I mean, it might have given him some ideas.

Joshua Prepares to Lead

And so it was that, just a few years later, Joshua the Priest prepared to lead the returning exiles into the land. He had made his preparations well. The lesser priests that he had sent out to the campfires of the people had all returned and reported that they had told the story of the first Joshua and that the people had listened eagerly.

The team of engineers that he had quietly sent off north a few days before had also sent a message reporting that they had found the perfect spot at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan, where the water could be diverted and that they were ready to do so at the rising of the sun.

Only Joshua's inner circle knew what was going to happen. Neither Prince Zerubbabel nor the lesser priests who had told the story knew what was going to happen. Joshua had no doubt that many would be astonished by what would take place the next day.

It was almost thirty kilometres from the temporary dam to the ford. No one would see what the engineers did, which was good. But the distance meant that the timing was going to be difficult. They had done their best to calculate the speed of the river, but if they got it right, it would frankly be a miracle.

The Moment of Truth

It was well past midday when the Exiles formed up and made ready to advance. The priests stood at the front of the group, carrying on their shoulders the sacred objects from the temple. The people would follow at a distance. When Joshua had judged that the time had come, he ordered the priests to advance.

The moment of truth arrived as the feet of the priests who carried the sacred vessels stepped into the river's edge.

Why the Story Was Told at that Moment

I can certainly understand why Joshua the Priest wanted to make sure the people knew the story of Joshua the Conqueror in his time. He was leading a group of people who were weary, who were worried about the future and who were feeling overwhelmed by the task that lay before them. How would they settle and rebuild in a land that they barely remembered and most of them had never even seen before?

Of course Joshua would have told them stories of how their ancestors had faced a very similar challenge in exactly the same spot. He would have told them about how God had performed wonders for their ancestors when they faced the same dilemma. And if he did find a way to re-enact the wonders of the story that he told with a few of the tricks that Cyrus the Great had used to take the City of Babylon, well, that was all the better.

Reading the Story Today

And what does that tell us who read this ancient story so many generations later? I think it reminds us of something important. It tells us that these stories were not just told to record the amazing things that had happened a long, long time ago. They were told and retold to help people find their way through ever new challenges and situations.

Joshua the Priest told the story of Joshua the Conqueror to show the people of his day that God would do great things for them and through them too. And I suspect that he wasn't above putting on a little demonstration of that for their sakes.

Being Faithful to the Stories

And, if we want to be faithful to these stories, that is what we need to do too. It is not enough just to proclaim that we believe what the Bible says. We need to look at that river we need to cross, that daunting challenge we need to face, that new identity we need to build in a strange land, and we need to step into the water in faith.

And if we, like Joshua the Priest, can find ways to make the miracles of old happen again, even if that includes a little engineering on our part, I think that is okay. That is also a way of stepping out in faith.