



The Crossing of the Jordan

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The **Jordan River** is the only large flowing body of water in Palestine and, as such, plays a significant part in the history of Israel and also in the early days of our Lord's ministry. The word **Jordan** comes from the Hebrew word *hayyarden*, meaning "flowing downward". This is because the course of the river is always descending.

Four rivers in Syria are recognized as the source of what becomes the **Jordan River** proper. Of these four rivers the most famous is called Banias. On this river stood the city of Paneas, the grotto for the Greek god, Pan. Later this was called Caesarea Philippi, and here occurred the great confession of Simon Peter (Matthew 16:13). These four rivers join and pour into Lake Huleh, a 20-mile long river, which is the start of the **Jordan**. The **Jordan River** then descends for 10 miles into the Sea of Galilee, a beautiful body of water 12 miles long. From the Sea of Galilee (also called the sea of Tiberius) to the place at which it enters the Dead Sea is 70 miles long; but the river itself, because of its serpentine curves, is 200 miles in length.

There are a number of rivers pouring into the **Jordan**. One of these rivers is called Jabbok. This river is about midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Here is the place where Jacob wrestled with the angel (Genesis 32:22). At the junction of

this river with the **Jordan** was the site known as Adam. Here the waters of the great river were held back when Israel crossed into the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership. (Joshua 3:16)

Near the Dead Sea, on the western side of the river, one mile east of Jericho, stood the city of Gilgal. It was here that Israel set up 12 stones at God's command (Joshua 4:19,20) as a remembrance of His mighty works with them. Later this site became an important religious center (1 Samuel 7:16 and 10:8).



The one single most important event in the Old Testament relating to the **Jordan River** was the crossing of the Israelites after the death of Moses into the land flowing with milk and honey. Moses refers to this crossing with anticipation in the Holy Book of Deuteronomy (3:20,25,27). The river became a boundary to the Israelites. Prior to the crossing of the **Jordan River**, the Hebrews occupied what we call the land of Israel. However, the Promised Land was on the western side of the **Jordan**. So while the



Hebrews occupied some of Israel it was not what they thought of as the Promised Land. It was only when they crossed the **Jordan** and reached the western side that God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled. It should be noted that the city of Jerusalem is found on the western side of the **Jordan**.

This need for a crossing is significant especially with regard to the spirit. We have heard that our souls will cross over into the heaven upon our deaths. This crossing into another realm often consumed the ancient civilizations. Ancient Egypt built its pyramids as a 'map' of the underworld to help those who departed reach their destination and not be lost [or enslaved] in oblivion. We, on the other hand, do not need any such map. However, we believe that we must cross a boundary to take us from death to life; from slavery to freedom.

It is not coincidental that the **Jordan River**, where Israel crossed from slavery into freedom, is also the place where St John the Baptist baptized. There is a crossing in baptism; a definite death of the old self and a start of a new life in The Lord Jesus Christ. Upon immersing the new believer into the baptismal water the old self dies and is buried. When the believer emerges from the waters of baptism he has been made anew in the Lord Jesus Christ. Since we are new creatures in the Lord Jesus Christ we are no longer subject to the slavery of sin - instead we have been set free. We have spiritually crossed the **Jordan** and escaped without harm from the wilderness of sin.

The theme of the **Jordan River** in the ritual of the church and its hymnology and poetry has never been comprehensively surveyed (this concerning all Christian sects). It has been all but ignored by the early church fathers, except for the Coptic and Ethiopian churches. In fact, it is given an important place in the Coptic and Ethiopian prayers.

We honor St John the Baptist in our Doxologies by saying, "John witnessed in the four Gospels, saying 'I have baptized my Savior in the waters of the **Jordan**.'" The waters of the **Jordan**, where the Lord Jesus Christ was baptized gives credence to the sacrament of Baptism. But more than the act of our Lord's baptism, the **Jordan River** was witness to the Epiphany of the Holy Trinity. It witnessed the coming of the Son, sanctifying its waters, just as the Holy Spirit sanctifies the waters of baptism. It saw the Holy Spirit descend on the Anointed One in the form of a dove. While also hearing the voice of the Father saying, "This is my Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased."

I can't help but feel that the waters of the **Jordan River** are unlike any on earth. They group in the **Jordan River** proper and end in the Dead Sea. There is no major city built on the banks of the **Jordan**, like other great rivers in the world, due to its swampy conditions and the presence of many wild animals. It carries no traffic like other great waterways due to its 27 rapids between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. Yet this seemingly worthless river at one point covered the Master and carried Him on its shoulders as He was moving from one shore to the other. In doing so it became a critical landmark in our church. It is a symbol of the new birth we receive and has become an ever-existing witness to the Holy Trinity.

The presence of our Lord Jesus Christ in our lives can do the same radical change as He did when He entered the **Jordan**. He will change us from being insignificant to being heirs to the Kingdom. He will turn our dead ends into living streams. He will give us the strength to live in righteousness when all around us is wilderness. But we need to be like the **Jordan River** and allow the Son to come and dwell inside of us so that we too can be ever existing witnesses to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.