

The Stones Of The Jordan

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I recently heard a sermon by Tom Kerry. He is the pastor of the Church of God International, and it was on a subject that I have overlooked before. It was so interesting to me and the more I looked into it the more excited I got about it and I would like to share that with you today. It all revolves around an overlooked prophecy by John the Baptist. I say “overlooked” because I have never heard it put this way.

So first I want to read the prophecy in Matthew 3:7, and then we will begin to pit the pieces together. As Mr. Armstrong used to say the Bible is like a jigsaw puzzle, you have to put the pieces together a little at a time, line upon line and precept upon precept.

Matthew 3:7-9 But when he [John] saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

John is basically saying here, “Don’t even go there, don’t even think about using that excuse,” saying that we have Abraham as our father. The second part of this verse is the verse where the prophecy actually begins.

Matthew 3:9-10 and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Now let us turn to Luke 1. I will lay some groundwork here. This is talking about Zacharias, John’s father here.

Luke 1:11-17 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. [See his wife Elizabeth had been barren and they were up in years, so this birth was actually a miracle.] And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Now drop down to verse 76.

Luke 1:76 “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways.”

I wanted you to see this because John was a prophet. Many might not think of it that way, I do not know. And what do prophets do? They prophesy sometimes. Now I want to begin to search out the location of where John was. Let us look at verse 80.

Luke 1:80 So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

It says here that he was in the wilderness (deserts). It is not known how long he was there, it might have been most of his adult life, we do not know for sure. Now let us turn over to Luke 3.

Luke 3:2-3 while Ananias and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

Again, it says here that he was in the wilderness in all the regions around the Jordan. Continuing on in verse 4.

Luke 3:4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.’”

Now let us go back to Matthew 3 and read Matthew’s version of this.

Matthew 3:1-4 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight.’” Now John himself was clothed in camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

Now, if you remember Elijah the prophet you can do a comparison between him and John and you can see that they are very similar in their appearance. Continuing on in verse 5.

Matthew 3:5-6 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

Have you ever looked at a map to see where Jerusalem is and where all of Judea and all the regions around the Jordan is? These people had to be coming from long distances, maybe traveling for days just to get to John and be baptized by him and to hear him preach.

From these verses though we cannot really pinpoint the exact location of the Jordan River where he was baptizing, can we? It could have been anywhere along there, right? Well, there is a verse that will pinpoint the exact location where he was, and it is in John 1.

John 1:6-7 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light [Jesus Christ], that all through him might believe.

John 1:19 Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”

In Matthew’s account, when he calls the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers,” he knew that they were not there to be baptized by him, he knew they did not care what he was talking about, they just wanted to know who he was: the Christ, Elijah, the prophet? He did not tell them, he just answered no to their questions. Now drop down to verse 28, because this is going to pinpoint the exact location of where he was.

John 1:28 These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

So now we see that he was at Bethabara, the exact location where he was doing the baptizing. The interesting thing about this is that if you were to look on a map you will see that Bethabara is on the east side of the Jordan. The people that were coming from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the regions around there were coming from the west side of the Jordan.

This is pretty interesting because Bethabara means “house (or family, like the house of Israel or the family of Israel) of crossing over.” It can also mean the house (or family) of passing over (Passover). Another meaning that has been given to this is the “Ford of Preparation.”

What was John doing there? He was preparing the way of the Lord to raise up children to Abraham from these stones (that is part of the prophecy.)

Now I want to give you a definition of what a ford is. A ford is a shallow place with good footing where a river or stream may be crossed by wading. So the people were having to wade across the Jordan River to get over to where John was.

Now God had placed him in that particular place for a reason, because this place has a special meaning to it. It was the same place, at the ford of the river, where the children of Israel came through. It was the very passage from the wilderness that John came through, where they had been wandering for 40 years and they gathered in preparation to cross over the Jordan into the Promised Land some 2,000 years earlier.

Let us do a little history search here. Let us go back to Genesis 12 and start with Abraham.

Genesis 12:6 Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land.

Shechem is an interesting place. Martin had mentioned in his sermon that it was one of the places of refuge. I just found that to be interesting.

Now recall that Abraham had left the land of Ur and that was in Babylonia, so God had actually called him out of Babylon, just like He has called us out of spiritual Babylon. So He called them out of Babylonia and they traveled to a place called Haran and after Abram's father died, God tells him to leave Haran and he is to go where God is going to give to his seed. So where does he go? He goes to Shechem.

It might be hard to prove from the Scriptures where he actually had to cross over the Jordan to get to Shechem, but most scholars will agree that he crossed over at the same location, at Bethabara—the same location that hundreds of years later would be the same place where the people of Israel would cross over into the Promised Land. Because had he tried to go around the other way, he would have had to go around all the seas. Continuing on in verse 7 it says,

Genesis 12:7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram [he is in Shechem now remember] and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

Now Shechem was actually located in a narrow sheltered valley between Mount Ebal (also known as the mount of cursing) and Mount Gerizim (also known as the mount of blessing) and at their base they are about 500 yards apart. It was there that Abraham received the first divine promise and he built an altar of stones to the Lord. Now let us move forward a little bit to Joshua 3.

Joshua 3:1 Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and they set out from Acacia Grove and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over.

So they come out of the wilderness where they had been wandering for 40 years and now they are at the Jordan ready to pass over into the Promised Land. Now we need to try to locate the exact place of the Jordan that they would cross over and we will find it in Scripture. Drop down to verse 14.

Joshua 3:14-15 So it was, when the people set out from their camp to cross over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), . . .

Now this was around April because it was just before the Passover. In verse 16 it will tell us the exact place where they were.

Joshua 3:16 . . . that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. [Bethabara was located on the east side of the Jordan, right?]

Notice that God did not stop the waters and say, “You all go ahead and come on over.” It did not stop until they actually walked into the water. If you look on a map, directly across from Jordan, Bethabara is on the east side, and on the west side just a little ways up is Jericho. They could probably see it from their side of the Jordan and this is actually the very same place that John was baptizing.

Joshua 3:17 Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground [the priests stayed in the river by the way], until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan.

Now we pinpointed the location. We know that it is the very same place where John was baptizing, but we have got to get back to the stones that John was referring to. When he said, “from these stones” he was not just saying God could raise up children to Abraham from these sticks, or from this river, or from this mountain. No, he said, “from these stones.” Because there are specific stones that he was referring to. Now let us go a little farther, in Joshua 4, and pick this up here.

Joshua 4:3 and commanded them, saying, ‘Take for yourselves twelve stones from here, out of the midst of the Jordan, from the place where the priests’ feet stood firm. You shall carry them over with you and leave them in the lodging place where you lodge tonight.’”

Now when they crossed over these twelve men carried these twelve stones with them and they lodged in Gilgal. These twelve stones, as we will see, actually represented the twelve tribes of the house of Israel.

Joshua 4:4-6 Then Joshua called the twelve men whom he had appointed from the children of Israel, one man from every tribe; and Joshua said to them: “Cross over before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and each one of you take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, that this may be a sign among you when your

children ask in time to come, saying, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’

Notice that God always mentions that you have to teach the children and pass down all that God has done for them and why. It is imperative, it is not just a suggestion.

Joshua 4:7-8 Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever.” And the children of Israel did so, just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones from the midst of the Jordan, as the Lord had spoken to Joshua, according to the number of the tribes of the children of Israel, and carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there.

Now verse 9, is interesting because apparently Joshua was inspired to do something else.

Joshua 4:9 Then Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests who bore the ark of the covenant stood; and they are there to this day.

Remember the priests stood right at the edge of the bank, right at Bethabara, right where John the Baptist was baptizing. It says that those stones are still there to this day, at least to the time of this writing.

Now most scholars will agree that these were a second set of stones that were placed where the priests were standing in the Jordan river, where the children of Israel had crossed over and at the time of this writing, they were still there. Now let us continue on putting these pieces together here. Turn over to Deuteronomy 27.

Deuteronomy 27:1-2 Now Moses, with the elders of Israel, commanded the people, saying: “Keep all the commandments which I command you today. And it shall be, on the day when you

cross over the Jordan to the land which the Lord your God is giving you, that you shall set up for yourselves large stones, and whitewash them with lime.”

This is a different set of stones. They whitewashed them with lime, apparently the lime maybe softened the surface of these large stones so that they could etch on them, as we will see in verse 3.

Deuteronomy 27:3-5 “You shall write on them [engrave or etch] all the words of this law, when you have crossed over, that you may enter the land which the Lord your God is giving you, ‘a land flowing with milk and honey,’ just as the Lord God of your fathers promised you. Therefore it shall be, when you have crossed over the Jordan, that on Mount Ebal you shall set up these stones, which I command you today, and you shall whitewash them with lime. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall not use an iron tool on them.

These must have been some pretty big stones in order to write or etch all the words of the law on them. In verse 5, it says they could not use any iron tool so I do not know what they etched them with, but in verse 8 it says “you shall write on them very plainly,” so whatever they used had to be very clear, on the stones, all the words of this law.

Now I do not know if he was talking about the blessings and the cursings or if he was talking about the whole law of Deuteronomy, or if he was talking about the whole law of Moses. I do not have the time to go into this aspect of it, but you can read more about this in Joshua 8:30-34, and there is more information there about this.

Deuteronomy 27:11-13 And Moses commanded the people on the same day, saying, “These shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, when you have crossed over the Jordan: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin; and these shall stand on Mount Ebal to curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.

Now where Shechem was in that area, scientists have actually proven that you can stand on one side of that mountain and speak with a loud voice and you can hear it all the way over on the other mountain. You can research this and you will see that is what the priests were reading out loudly to them was the blessings and the cursings.

Now these large stones with the whole law engraved on them were very plainly placed at Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim—the passageway to where Abraham had settled in Shechem. Very interesting. So now we are beginning to see what John was talking about when he said, “God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” Remember that.

So now we have these large stones with the law of God engraved in them and the twelve stones that were placed at Gilgal where the Israelites had camped after they crossed over the river Jordan and also the twelve stones that Joshua was inspired to place in the Jordan River where the feet of the priests were carrying the ark of the covenant, and where John the Baptist was baptizing.

When John says “from these stones,” he was referring to the stones of the Jordan, and he had something specific in mind when he prophesied about this. Let us go back to the prophesy again in Matthew 3.

Matthew 3:7-10 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, [we now know that they were there to find out who he was] he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

The prophesy is this: that God had rejected them. Remember that Christ came to His own and His own rejected Him, so God rejected them. He said

that even now “the ax is at the root of the tree.” He was cutting them off and was going to raise up children to Abraham from these stones—the spiritual house of Israel, as we will see.

With Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone—represented by those large stones with the whole law engraved in them—and the twelve apostles, represented by the twelve stones that Joshua was inspired to place where the priests stood carrying the ark of the covenant in the Jordan. Those stones represent the very foundation of the spiritual house of Israel. Now turn to Ephesians 2:19, where Paul writes,

Ephesians 2:19-20 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles [represented by those twelve stones] and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone.

Turn over to Revelation 21.

Revelation 21:14 Now the wall of the city [talking about spiritual Jerusalem coming out of heaven] had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

Let us go back to I Peter 2, because he had something to add to this. In my Bible there is a heading there that says: “The Chosen Stone and His Chosen People”

I Peter 2:4-10 Coming to Him as to a living stone [the stones are alive here], rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious [referring to Jesus Christ], you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.”

Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone,” and “A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense.” They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed. [The ax is being laid to the root of the tree!] But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

We are living proof. We are the living stones, we are the children that God has raised up to Abraham from these stones—the stones of the Jordan that John the Baptist was prophesying about.