

Joshua 4:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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?

Analysis

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?

This verse establishes the pedagogical purpose of the twelve memorial stones taken from the Jordan. The phrase lema'an (לְמַעַן, "in order that") indicates divine intentionality—the stones serve as a teaching tool for future generations. The Hebrew machar (מָחָר, "in time to come") literally means "tomorrow" but idiomatically refers to the indefinite future, emphasizing that this memorial transcends the present generation.

The anticipated question "What mean these stones?" (mah ha'avanim ha'eleh, מַה הָאֲבָנִים הָאֵלֶּה) creates a deliberate teaching opportunity. God ordains visible signs to prompt inquiry from children, who will then receive instruction in His mighty works. This reflects the biblical pattern that faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17) and that covenant parents bear responsibility for transmitting redemptive history to children (Deuteronomy 6:7, 20-25; Psalm 78:1-8).

Theologically, this establishes the principle of catechesis—using physical objects, ceremonies, and occasions to teach spiritual truth. The stones function sacramentally, not as sources of power but as visible words proclaiming God's faithfulness. This anticipates the New Testament sacraments of baptism and the

Lord's Supper, which similarly serve as visible proclamations of gospel truth demanding explanation and instruction.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern cultures commonly erected memorial stones (*masséboth*) to commemorate significant events—military victories, treaty-makings, and divine encounters. However, Israel's memorials differed fundamentally—they testified to Yahweh's redemptive acts rather than human achievements or pagan deities. Similar question-and-answer pedagogical patterns appear throughout Scripture: Passover (Exodus 12:26-27, 13:14-15), the altar at the Jordan (Joshua 22:24-27), and various festivals (Deuteronomy 6:20-25).

The Jordan crossing occurred around 1406 BCE (traditional chronology), marking Israel's entry into the Promised Land after forty years of wilderness wandering. The memorial stones were set up at Gilgal (Joshua 4:20), which became Israel's base camp during the conquest and a significant cultic site in Israel's history (Joshua 5:9-10; 1 Samuel 7:16; 10:8; 11:14-15). Archaeological surveys near Jericho have identified several ancient sites that may preserve the memory of Gilgal, though exact identification remains debated.

This verse reflects the biblical emphasis on intergenerational covenant transmission. Unlike cultures where religious knowledge remained the province of professional priests, Israel's covenant structure made every father a theologian and every home a catechetical center. The anticipated question from children assumes engaged, curious faith rather than passive religious observance.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. What visible reminders of God's faithfulness have you established in your home to prompt spiritual conversations with children?
2. How are you preparing to answer your children's (or others') questions about God's mighty works and Christian faith?
3. What modern practices can serve as 'memorial stones' to help the next generation understand and embrace covenant faith?
4. How does the biblical emphasis on parental instruction challenge contemporary models that outsource spiritual formation to professionals?
5. In what ways do baptism and the Lord's Supper function similarly to these stones as visible proclamations demanding explanation?

Interlinear Text

וַיֹּאמֶר	אֵל	בְּנֵיכֶם	יִשְׂרָאֵל	וַיֹּאמֶר	אֲשֶׁר
And he spake	H413	When your children	of Israel	And he spake	H834
H559		H1121	H3478	H559	
וַיִּשְׁאַל	בְּנֵיכֶם	מָחָר	אֶת	אֲבוֹתֶיךָ	וַיֹּאמֶר
shall ask	When your children	in time to come	H853	their fathers	And he spake
H7592	H1121	H4279		H1	H559
מָה	הָאֲבָנִים	הָאֵלֶּה:			
H4100	What mean these stones	H428			
	H68				

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 4:6 (Parallel theme): 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?