

The Story of the Life of Christ – Lesson 8 26 A.D.

The Baptism of Jesus

Scripture on the Baptism of Jesus

In the last lesson on Chapter 3 of Luke we skipped the first two verses. It was there that Luke, the historian, gave us the supremely important date ¹ that marked when John the Baptist baptized Jesus and when Jesus began His ministry. The next eighteen verses he spent backtracking to describe how John the Baptist had arrived at that moment with Jesus the Messiah. In this lesson we now backtrack to Luke 3:1 and 2 which are the historical markers that Luke had laid down.

Luke 3:1a **In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar**

We know from history that Tiberius was co-regent as Emperor with his stepfather Augustus for two years and then became sole ruler in 14 A.D. That meant the actual beginning of his co-regency was 12 A.D.² Thus that made 26 A.D. the fourteenth anniversary of his reign. The 365 days immediately following that anniversary were thus known as part of the fifteenth year of his reign. We can assume that at least the first part of that 15th year fell in 26 A.D. if not all of it.

Luke 3:1b **--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea,**

Wikipedia has the following entry for Pontius Pilate which tells us he was governor of Judea in 26 A.D.:

“Pontius Pilate was the fifth prefect of the Roman province of Judaea from A.D. 26–36. He served under the Emperor Tiberius. He is best known today for the trial and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The historical sources for Pilate's life are an inscription known as the Pilate Stone, which confirms his historicity and establishes his title as prefect; a brief mention by Tacitus; he is also mentioned by Philo of Alexandria; Josephus; the four canonical gospels; the Gospel of Nicodemus; the Gospel of Marcion; and other apocryphal works. Based on these sources, it appears that Pilate was an equestrian of the Pontii family, and succeeded Valerius Gratus as prefect of Judaea in A.D. 26.”

¹ *It was important because it nails down the chronology of the life of Christ.*

² *Wikipedia entry on Tiberius: “According to Suetonius, these ceremonies, and the declaration of his ‘co-princeps’ took place in the year 12 A.D., after Tiberius’ return from Germania. --- Augustus died in A.D. 14, at the age of seventy-five.”*

Luke 3:1c Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene ³—

Both Herod (Antipas) and his brother Philip had been governing over their territories since shortly after the death of their father Herod the Great in 4 BC.

Luke 3:2a while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, NKJV

Annas (also known as Ananus in Josephus) served as the officiating High Priest from 6 A.D. to 14 A.D. Caiaphas was his son-in-law. Caiaphas served as officiating High Priest from 18 A.D. to 36 A.D. The Gospel accounts of the life of Christ often speak of “the High Priests.” During the time of John’s Baptism of Christ, this designation referred to two men, Annas and Caiaphas. Although most English translations of the Gospels have it translated “chief priests” the original Greek is the plural of a Greek word, ἀρχιερεῖς {är-khē-e-ryü's}. That word in the singular is universally translated “High Priest” so this plural should obviously be translated “High Priests.” Perhaps the confusion comes from the fact that according to the Law of Moses there could only be one “High Priest.” He was supposed to serve from his appointment until his death. However, beginning with the corrupt reign of Herod the Great, the High Priesthood became a revolving door of temporary political appointments. During that period, which ran all the way until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., there was always a serving High Priest, and at least one former High Priest. All former High Priests were called “High Priest” for the remainder of their lifetimes, and they all retained seats and positions of authority in the Sanhedrin. Later, between the Crucifixion in 30 A.D. and the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., there were as many as seven living High Priests at one time. Only the serving High Priest officiated in the Temple. During the time of Christ’s ministry, Caiaphas was the serving High Priest, and Annas was the only former High Priest still living who was also called a High Priest. Unfortunately, most of the translations translate “High Priests” as “chief priests” therefore obscuring the fact that this is specifically talking about two men, Annas and Caiaphas, who were the “High Priests.”

Luke 3:2b the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert.⁴

What does this mean when it says, “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert”? A common misconception is that this is speaking of the beginning of John’s calling or ministry. The key question is: What, or who, was the “word of God” of which Luke was speaking? The Gospel of John gives us the answer:

³ *Lysanias was the ruler of a small realm called Abila or Abilene on the western slopes of Mount Hermon.*

⁴ *The Greek word translated “desert” here is ἔρημος {e'-rā-mos}. According to Strong’s Lexicon it means “solitary, lonely, desolate, uninhabited.”*

John 1:1-4 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.

John 1:14-15 “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”

The “Word of God” coming to John in the desert was not a “what” but a “who.” Luke 3:2b described the coming of Jesus Christ to John at the Jordan River to be baptized. Some may argue that “the word of God” coming to John in the wilderness speaks of the call of John. One of the problems with that is that John had received the call to his mission from before his birth.⁵ Another problem with that interpretation is that whatever this event was, it is clearly established by verses 1 and 2 above as occurring in 26 A.D. Meanwhile, Luke 3:23 established Jesus’ age at His baptism as nearly thirty. Since we have previously established his birth as being early in 4 BC, this establishes the date of His Baptism as 26 A.D. Thus, whatever “the Word of God” coming to John was, it happened the same year that Jesus was baptized. If this was talking about the calling of John, it would mean that John the Baptist’s calling occurred within a few months of Jesus’ baptism and about a year before John’s arrest by Herod Antipas. Considering what we know about the ministry and influence of John the Baptist by the time of Jesus’ ministry, it seems impossible to believe that it started just a few months before Christ’s baptism which also marked the waning of John’s ministry.⁶

Another question is where was this “desert” where John was baptizing? Wherever it was, it clearly had plenty of water in which to baptize. This “desert” where John was baptizing was at the Jordan. Josephus established in his Wars of the Jews that the lower Jordan River Valley was called “a desert” in those days as we see below:

“Now Jordan's visible stream arises from this cavern (*at Caesarea Philippi*), and divides the marshes and fens of the lake Semechonitis; when it hath run another hundred and twenty furlongs, it first passes by the city Julias (*Bethsaida*), and then passes through the middle of the lake Gennesareth (*Sea of Galilee*); after which it runs a long way over a desert, and then makes

⁵ *Luke 1:13a-17 “You (Zechariah) are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”*

⁶ *John the Baptist said not long after this: John 3:30 “He (Jesus) must become greater; I (John) must become less.*

its exit into the lake Asphaltitis (*Dead Sea*).” Wars of the Jews, by Flavius Josephus, Book 3, Chapter 10, Verse 7b (*written circa 75 A.D.*).

So, the lower Jordan was considered “a desert” in the 1st Century A.D. It is still an uninhabited area today.

Next, we have to ask: Where would John have been baptizing? The obvious answer was that John would have been baptizing at what was called “the Fords of the Jordan.” That was at the Jordan River, about six miles from Jericho. This was where Joshua and the Ark crossed the Jordan about 1500 years earlier, as described in Joshua 3 and 4. It was also on one of the main highways in the Middle East, where many of the pilgrims and travelers on their way to and from Jerusalem for the fall feasts journeyed. Because of the annual winter flooding of the Jordan Valley, and the consequent flooding of lands at all close to the river, the closest habitation was miles away from the summer banks at the Fords of the Jordan.

Despite the foregoing facts, for reasons that elude me, many scholars have decided the chronological events that Luke gives referred to the beginning of John’s ministry. It always used to frustrate me to read this passage using this interpretation. I would always say to myself: “Why in the world was Luke the historian supposedly telling us when **John** started his ministry, when he had to know that the important date in question was when **Jesus** started His ministry?” However, although I grumbled inwardly, I would accept this view because I had a picture in my mind of John somewhere way away from the Jordan, on some rock in the desert, when this “word (or calling) of God” came to him in a vision or a dream. However, when I traveled to Israel and saw the place on the Jordan where Joshua crossed the Jordan and Jesus was baptized, I realized that if there was ever any place that qualified as desert that place did. Except for a few dozen yards east and west of the river, there were nothing but rocks and sand dunes for miles in either direction. It was only afterwards that what should have been obvious dawned on me. When John baptized Jesus in the Jordan he was “in the desert.” When Luke spoke about “the Word of God” coming to John there “in the desert,” he was not speaking about the coming of a call of the Holy Spirit, but the coming of the Word of God (Jesus Christ) to John to be baptized.

The verses between verses 3 and 21 which we studied in the previous lesson referred to John’s ministry before the baptism of Christ and were studied in that section. We can now continue with the passage at that point.

Luke 3:21a **When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.**

What is the interpretation of “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too”? To what period does the “when” refer? I must concede there could be two interpretations. The “when” could be just one day from among the many days of

the baptizing ministry of John. The “when” could also refer to the entire period or era of many years when John was baptizing the people. We must remember that in this passage, Luke was looking back to a period at least thirty years before he wrote his Gospel. That era may have occurred even before Luke was born.

If we accept the first interpretation, we accept a view that Jesus and John must have been surrounded by other people being baptized. That is usually the interpretation of artists or movie makers picturing the scene (as an example see the picture below).

Yet nothing in the scriptures indicates that anyone but John had seen the Spirit descend on Jesus or heard the voice of the Father saying, “You are my Son, whom I love.” Only John knew that the Father had announced that the Messiah was among them. Only John knew that it was Jesus. After Jesus came back from His temptation by Satan in the desert John told some of his disciples by saying: “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:28).

Also, we should note that the verse says, “when all the people were being baptized,” not “when some of the people.” “All” of the people were baptized only during the entire ministry of John, not on one afternoon when Jesus might have been baptized along with “some” others. If John had not been alone with Jesus at His baptism, the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him and the voice of God saying, “This is my Son” would have caused a sensation that is not in evidence in the Gospel of John which is the only Gospel which records Jesus’ return from the desert.



A Common Artistic Interpretation of the Baptism of Jesus

Since I have taken the position that John was alone when he baptized Jesus, I must also answer the question, “How would Jesus have found John alone?” John was almost always surrounded

by his disciples and those coming to hear him. However, according to the Law of Moses, travel of over 2000 cubits (1000 yards) was considered work, and work was forbidden on Sabbath days. So, on any day that was a Sabbath, John would not have been troubled by travelling pilgrims. It should be pointed out that a “Sabbath” was not just the weekly Sabbath of the seventh day, but also any of the special Sabbaths related to the Feasts. John may not have been surrounded by pilgrims on any of the Sabbaths, but what about his disciples? We know that John himself avoided going into Jerusalem.⁷ He probably avoided Jerusalem because he knew the Sanhedrin despised him and would have arrested him. Almost certainly, John would have stayed on the east bank of the Jordan, which was under the jurisdiction of Herod Antipas, and not under the religious jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin. However, the fact that John didn’t go to Jerusalem didn’t keep his disciples from going. If Jesus had come to John on one of those “Special Sabbaths” related to one of the Holy Days John’s disciples might well have been away.

So, what Holy Day might this have been?

One clue to figuring out which Holy Day this might have been at that time of the year was the location where Jesus was baptized. As we shall see, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, all tell us it happened at the Jordan River. The only time it was practical to baptize in the Jordan River was at the end of the dry season when the river was down. That was also the time that the pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles occurred. So that tells us that Jesus was probably baptized about the time of those Special Sabbaths related to the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles.

The second key to figuring out the day this might have happened is the patterns that we can see are set up in Scripture. There the prophetic foreshadows that the Feasts and Holy Days are meant to convey are fulfilled on the days of those Feasts and Holy Days. So, what Special Sabbath foreshadowed what happened to Jesus on the day He was baptized? It seems obvious to me that the Day of Atonement is a very good candidate based on the following passage related to the ancient ceremonial related to the Day of Atonement and set up in the Law of Moses. Below is the passage from Leviticus. The corrected translation is very important:

Leviticus 16:7-8 “Then he (*the High Priest Aaron*) is to take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats--one lot for the LORD and the other for ~~the scapegoat~~ Azazel (*Satan*).”

You will notice that I have substituted the name “Azazel” for the words “the scapegoat.” This is in accord with the original Hebrew text and also the American Standard and New Revised Standard translations. The word translated “scapegoat” by the NIV and KJV in Leviticus 16 is אֲזָזֵל {az·ā·zāl’}. The Hebrew word only appears in this passage and thus its meaning is uncertain. However, Kevin Howard and Marvin Rosenthal, in The Feasts of the Lord, page 123 say “Some debate exists as to the exact meaning of *azazel*. Some believe it was

⁷ To hear John’s teaching, the people of Jerusalem “went out” to him (Matthew 3:5-7).

a reference to Satan, for in Jewish tradition *Azazel* was the name of a fallen angel. However, most scholars believe that the word was derived from the Hebrew word *azel* which carries the idea of ‘escape.’”

Also, in Zondervan’s Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament Law the note is made “some see this word as the name of the desert spirit (Azazel) to whom the goat is sent.”

The comment of The New Unger's Bible Dictionary ⁸ is also instructive on this term:

“The Hebrew term is translated (Lev 16:8,10,26) ‘scapegoat.’ It is a word of doubtful interpretation and has been variously understood. By some it is thought to be the name of the goat sent into the desert. The objection to this is that in vv. 10, 26 the Azazel clearly seems to be that **for** or **to which** the goat is let loose.⁹ Many believe Azazel to be a personal being, either a spirit, a demon, or Satan himself.”

In view of these facts I think it is more than reasonable to understand this name as referring to Satan. If we interpret “Azazel” to mean “Satan” or the evil spirit of the desert, it means that the verse should read “one lot for the LORD and the other for Satan.”

Continuing in Leviticus:

Leviticus 16:8-10 “Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot ~~as the scapegoat~~ for Azazel (*Satan*) shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert ~~as a scapegoat~~ for (or “to”) Azazel (*Satan*).

As you can see, I have continued to substitute the name “Azazel” for the word “scapegoat.” I believe the name “Azazel” refers to Satan. It is worth noting that the accurate translation from the Hebrew in all three cases where the word לְעִזָּאֵל {la az·ä·zāl} occurs should be “for Azazel.” The NIV, KJV, and NAS all translate the three occurrences of the words differently each time it occurs which helps to make their faulty translation more plausible. The NIV uses “for the scapegoat,” “as the scapegoat,” and “as a scapegoat.” The correct understanding translates it the same every time; “for Azazel.”

We continue in Leviticus:

Leviticus 16:20-22, 29-30 “When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites--all their sins--and put them on the goat’s head. He shall

⁸ Published by Moody Press of Chicago, Illinois, 1988.

⁹ One goat is **for** the LORD. The other is **for** Azazel. It does **not** say the goat is **to be** Azazel.

send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.----- “This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work (*that means this was a Special Sabbath*)--whether native-born or an alien living among you-- because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins.

So, there were two goats involved in the ceremony at the Tabernacle. What is the meaning of the two goats? As far as the meaning of the **first goat**, there is considerable agreement that will be fulfilled on the Day of Atonement in the year when Jesus Christ returns to begin the Kingdom of Israel anew with Himself as King. However, what is the fulfillment of the meaning of the **second goat** which was driven into the wilderness to Azazel (Satan), having taken on itself the responsibility for sin?

If we have a correct understanding of the Leviticus passage and the meaning of the word Azazel, I think it is quite easy to understand that Jesus Himself fulfilled the meaning of the ceremony of the second goat when Jesus Christ was “led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.” Also, if we understand that water often stands for judgement for sin, we can see that John, who was a priest, putting his hands on Jesus to baptize Him in the water of the Jordan, lines up perfectly with what the High Priest did on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus:

Leviticus 16:21 “He (the High Priest) is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites--all their sins--and put them on the goat’s head.”

It is no coincidence that John the Baptist was a priest, descended from Aaron and Zadok on both his mother’s and father’s side.

So, following our reasoning so far, Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in 26 A.D. on 10 Tishri which was the Day of Atonement. His being led into the desert fulfilled the imagery of the second goat of the Day of Atonement on that very day.

This brings us to another point about that date. If Jesus began his ministry on the 10th day of the seventh month (by the religious calendar) and if He was crucified on the 14th day of the first month (as we will show) then His ministry was just a few days over three and a half years. It is an observed fact that patterns and times are often repeated in the Bible.

You may remember that in a previous lesson I pointed out the connection between the life of Christ and the different Old Testament Temples: I showed that Christ was born on the 3rd day

of the month of Adar in 4 BC. He was the true temple. This was the same day as the dedication of Zerubbabel's temple. Zerubbabel's temple was constructed in three years, six months and 7 days (by the Jewish Calendar) as recorded in Haggai 1:14-15 and Ezra 6:15.¹⁰ Coincidentally this was the exact length of time of Jesus' ministry from His baptism on the Day of Atonement in 26 A.D. to His resurrection on the Feast of the First fruits in 30 A.D.

In Revelation ¹¹ the two witnesses will preach the Gospel of Christ for three and a half years. They will then be killed only to be raised three days later. It will be another pattern of Christ's earlier ministry.

Both Matthew Henry and A.R. Faussett taught that Jesus' ministry was three and a half years:

A. R. Faussett: "Jesus died in the middle of the last week, A.D. 30. His prophetic life lasted three and a half years,"¹²

Matthew Henry "He shall make strong the testament to the many; the last seven, or the last week, yea, half that seven, or half that week (namely, the latter half, the three years and a half which Christ spent in his public ministry), shall bring to an end sacrifice and oblation."¹³

When Jesus Christ announced the beginning of his ministry at Nazareth he made a comparison of His ministry to the three-and-a-half-year ministry of Elijah during the drought:

Luke 4:25-26 "I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon."

Also, there is the inference of a three-and-a-half-year ministry in Luke 13 where Christ told the parable of the fig tree.

¹⁰ Haggai 1:14-15 "So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month in the second year of King Darius." Ezra 6:15 "The temple was completed on the third day of the month Adar, in the sixth year of the reign of King Darius."

¹¹ Revelation 11:1-12.

¹² Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown, *Commentary, Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (1871), *THE BOOK OF DANIEL, CHAPTER 9*.

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary On The Whole Bible, (1706-1714), Commentary on Daniel 9*

Luke 13:6-9 “Then he (*Jesus*) told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

If the vineyard was Israel and the master of the vineyard was Christ, which I believe is the clear assumption, then there had been three years which the master had come looking for fruit. The first time was at the first Passover recorded in John 2:13. At the time that Jesus spoke these words the third Passover of His ministry had just been passed (Luke 9). At the fourth Passover the following episode took place.

Matthew 21:19 “Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, ‘May you never bear fruit again!’ Immediately the tree withered.”¹⁴

The clear implication is that four Passovers occurred during the ministry of Christ, that it was three years plus the time it took for the events from His baptism through the events of John 1 through 2:13. That would have made it about three and a half years.

So, even without the understanding that the pattern of Jesus’ life was foreshadowed by the goat being driven out to Azazel (Satan) on the Day of Atonement, we can calculate that Jesus’ baptism by John was within a few days of three and a half years before His death. Passover is on the 14th day of the 1st Jewish month. The Day of atonement is on the 10th day of the 7th Jewish month. So, the Passover when Jesus was crucified was three and a half years and four days after the Day of Atonement on which He was baptized.

A question which throws a little more light on the scene is, “Where exactly did this Baptism take place?” We know from Matthew 3:13 and Mark 1:9 that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan. But, where on the Jordan? The Jordan in ancient times and even today is not the gently flowing stream between two grassy banks which I often imagined it to be. Below Beth Shan (Scythopolis) the Jordan is a harsh and inhospitable place. There was only one place to cross between the ford there and the Dead Sea. That place was the Fords of the Jordan about six miles from Jericho. That ford was on the road that ran north and south, east of the Jordan River. It was the road that many of the pilgrims coming to Jerusalem would take when coming to the Feast of Tabernacles and the Day of Atonement. Those from Galilee, Syria, or Babylon and points north, west and south would take that road and cross at that ford going west up to Jerusalem. It was the ideal place for John the Baptist to set up to preach to multitudes and afterward to baptize. The place where Jesus was baptized wasn’t off the beaten path as I had earlier imagined it. It was right astride it! At that time of the year, it was the end of the dry season, and the flow of the

¹⁴ See also Mark 11:12-14 and Mark 11:19-21.

river was vastly reduced from the raging torrent it became during rainy season. At its height at Passover the Jordan River could reach to a width of over a half mile. Close to the Feast of Tabernacles it was ideal for Baptism being not much more than knee deep. Furthermore, it was a place which had enormous historical and prophetic significance. It was the place where Jesus' namesake Joshua, crossed the Jordan leading the Children of Israel into the Promised Land. It was the place where the waters of judgment stood up in a heap back to Adam as the Ark of the Covenant (the Ark symbolized Jesus) stood in the middle of the river as twelve stones were taken out. Twelve stones were taken out of the waters of judgement. Something had to replace them. They were eventually replaced under the Judgment by "the Rock" who was "the stone the builders rejected" (Joshua 3:14-4:18). Jesus' baptism at the Fords of the Jordan that day thus fulfilled the meaning of a shadow 1500 years old.

So, if we accept the Day of Atonement as the day of the Lord's baptism it sets the scene. John had been baptizing at the Fords of the Jordan about six miles from Jericho. It was also on one of the main highways in the Middle East, during the dry season, where many of the pilgrims and travelers on their way to and from Jerusalem journeyed. The Day of Atonement was a Sabbath of Sabbaths. The Feast of Tabernacles would start in five days. The flood of pilgrims on the way to the Feast of Tabernacles would resume on the next day, but on the Day of Atonement (a Sabbath of Sabbaths) there would have been no Jewish pilgrims traveling thus leaving Jesus alone. Jesus always did the work of the True Temple on the Sabbath, even as the priests at the Temple did the work of the shadow Temple on the Sabbath. John, who never left the desert, was probably alone, without even his disciples. They had probably gone up to Jerusalem the day before to observe the Day of Atonement. Jerusalem was only twenty miles away. Thus, only John the Baptist was there to witness the miracle of Heaven opening. Only John the Baptist was there to hear God the Father speaking from Heaven His affirmation of who Jesus was! This absence of others explains why, when Jesus came back from the desert after his temptation, John the Baptist had to point Jesus out to his disciples, John and Andrew, as the one about whom he must have been talking excitedly for over forty days (John 1:36-37). This sign, that God gave only to John from heaven was the basis of John's testimony to Jesus' status as Messiah. It was also the sign that the Pharisees and Sadducees always said they wanted Jesus to produce for them! (Matthew 12:38, Matthew 16:1, Mark 8:11, Luke 11:16, Luke 11:29, John 2:18, John 6:30).

The fact that the location of this baptism was the very same spot where Joshua (remember Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua) and the Ark (which is the symbolic representation of Jesus) crossed the Jordan in Joshua 3 and 4 helps make it clear that ancient event was a foreshadowing of Jesus' baptism.

So, we have established that the date Jesus was baptized was the Day of Atonement 26 A.D.¹⁵ We have established its significance. We have also established the place He

¹⁵ *The precise date according to the Gregorian calendar was 9 September, 26 A.D. According to the Jewish calendar it was 10 Tishri 3787. The day of the week was Wednesday.*

was baptized as being at the Fords of the Jordan and the significance of that location. Now we can resume the study of Luke 3:21 which we left some time ago.

Luke 3:21a **When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.**

As we have explained, this only meant that Jesus was baptized during the time that John the Baptist was still baptizing, which was a period of about ten years. Remember, Luke was writing about thirty years later. At this point Luke, described the baptism of Jesus in much the same terms as Matthew and Mark. However, in verse 23, Luke (ever the one conscious of the precise time) gave us the age of Jesus. We will look at that first before we look at verses 21b and 22.

Luke 3:23 **Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.**

We have earlier established that Jesus was born on January 29, 4 BC. If so, he would have turned 30 years old in January of 27 A.D., thus in September of 26 A.D. he would have been “about thirty years old.” Thus, this passage nails down the year of Christ’s baptism. This makes it clear that Luke’s historical mileposts in Luke 3:1-2 do not deal with the start of John’s ministry. As I have suggested that ministry must have started many years before, based on the time it would have taken to develop the significant ministry that Scripture clearly shows that John had among the people. It is also based on the fact that a Levitical Priest like John reached the legitimate age of service at twenty.¹⁶

Now we can press on to the three descriptions of Jesus’ baptism in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Matthew 3:13-14 **Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”**

Matthew’s account tells us a little more than the other two. We have established that John was alone when Jesus came to him at the river. Through some agency John became aware of who Jesus was. Perhaps he had been told who would come to him that day by the Holy Spirit. However, the means of this knowledge isn’t revealed to us. Remember, the Gospels only ever give a brief summary of events. This interview could have lasted over an hour.¹⁷ What we can discern from what is recorded here is that he knew when he saw Jesus that Jesus was without sin, and didn’t need John’s typical baptism which signified repentance from sin. He also knew that Jesus had far greater authority than he did.

Going on in Matthew’s unique account:

¹⁶ *1 Chronicles 23:24*

¹⁷ *Perhaps the Holy Spirit revealed that Jesus was the son of John’s mother Elizabeth’s niece who John must have heard about, and who was once thought to have died in the massacre of the infants in Jerusalem.*

Matthew 3:15 Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented.

Clearly this baptism was going to be far different in meaning than the other baptisms John had performed. However, John didn’t understand what this Baptism signified. I believe that this Baptism and Jesus’ comment signified that Jesus would fulfill for the people of Israel and for all mankind the righteousness that was needed to stand before the Father.

It also completed the symbolism of the ceremony that had taken place on this spot almost 1500 years before. At that time Joshua had taken twelve stones ¹⁸ out of the middle of the waters of the Jordan. Figuratively, that meant they were delivered from judgment. Jesus, the stone the builders rejected, had come to complete the picture. He would take the place in the waters of judgment for those who had been delivered. Thus, His baptism in the waters declared what He had come to do.

The Gospel of Mark begins with the account of Jesus’ baptism.

Mark 1:9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Lacking the prior history given in the other Gospels, Mark took the space to establish for his Gospel that Jesus was from Nazareth in Galilee.

Now we have the three almost identical accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke of what happened immediately after Jesus’ baptism.

Matthew 3:16a As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened,

Mark 1:10a As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open

Luke 3:21a And as he was praying, heaven was opened

The three accounts together tells us that as soon as Jesus came out of the water after being baptized, he prayed. At that time heaven was opened. The Greek word translated in Mark as “torn open” used here in Mark is σκίζω {skhid'-zo} which the Strong’s Lexicon translates:

1. to cleave, cleave asunder, rend, 2. to divide by rending, 3. to split into factions, be divided.

¹⁸ *The twelve stones stood for the twelve tribes of Israel.*

It is the same word used to describe the veil of the Temple being torn in two during Jesus' crucifixion. Mark's version thus gives us an even more dramatic scene than Matthew's. I leave it to your imagination as to what heaven being torn open looked like. I think of it as a portal between dimensions being opened. I remind you that I believe that the description of this scene would have been spread like wildfire if there had been any other eyewitnesses except John.

Matthew 3:16b and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.

Mark 1:10b and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

Luke 3:22b and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.¹⁹

This fulfilled the prophecy in Isaiah 11 about the ministry of the Spirit in the life of the Messiah:

Isaiah 11:1-2 "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;²⁰ from his roots a Branch ²¹ will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him -- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD."

Matthew 3:17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Mark 1:11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Luke 3:22c And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

This heavenly testimony was only given to John the Baptist. The Pharisees and Sadducees later demanded such a sign:

Matthew 16:1 "The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven."²²

¹⁹ *The Holy Spirit also came upon the only two Kings that the LORD had anointed, Saul and David (1 Samuel 10:6, 1 Samuel 16:13).*

²⁰ *Jesse was the father of David.*

²¹ *The Messiah is also called "the Branch" in Isaiah 4:2, Jeremiah 23:5, 33:15, Zechariah 3:8, 6:12*

²² *Also Mark 8:11, Luke 11:16, and John 2:18.*

They weren't given the sign. They wouldn't have believed it anyway. They saw Jesus raise the dead and heal the blind and the lame and still didn't believe. The only other time this particular testimony was given was on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. Hermon) in the last year of Jesus' ministry when it was given to Peter, James, and John:

Matthew 17:5 "While he (*Jesus*) was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!'"²³

Matthew 4:1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil.

Mark 1:12-13 At once the Spirit sent him out ²⁴ into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan.

Luke 4:1-2 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.

Jesus was sent out into the desert where he was tempted for 40 days. Some scholars contend that this was the Judean Desert, which was the area southeast of Jerusalem, just west of the Dead Sea. They picked this because it was close by. However, other scholars point out that when just the term "the desert" or "the wilderness" was used it was invariably referring to the wilderness around Sinai ²⁵ in which the Jews wandered for 40 years.²⁶ This makes sense to me, because as the redeemer of Israel, Jesus was going to recreate the testing of Israel and become their righteousness for them. Where better to do that than in the place that Israel failed. Where Israel failed for forty years whenever they saw even the possibility of going thirsty, Jesus trusted although He went totally without water for forty days. Also, at Mt. Sinai, Jesus would be revisiting the scene where God revealed himself in shadow, to both Moses and Elijah.

This does not necessarily mean that Jesus was in the desert only forty days. It could mean that His temptation in the desert lasted forty days. I am inclined to believe that all forty days of His temptation took place on Mount Sinai and lasted forty days there.

²³ See also Mark 9:7 and Luke 9:35.

²⁴ The Greek word here is ἐκβάλλω {ek-bä'l-lō} which has several meanings in Strong's. The one applicable here is probably "to lead one forth or away somewhere with a force which he cannot resist."

²⁵ Mt. Sinai is actually in north central Arabia, west of Ha-il. It is not in the "so-called" Sinai Peninsula where it was later mistakenly located. Paul himself located Mt. Sinai in Arabia in Galatians 4:25. See my paper on "The Route of the Exodus."

²⁶ It is known today as the "Nafud."

The Gospel of John did not describe Jesus' baptism. It does include John the Baptist's later description of it to his disciples and the Pharisees just before Jesus came back from his testing in the wilderness. We shall study that in a following lesson.

The Place

I thought it would be appropriate to try to create for you some sense of the place that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River at the Fords of the Jordan. I have included some descriptions, maps, and photographs.

The Jordan River Valley, Zondervan, New Atlas of the Bible, Carl G. Rasmussen, 1989

Although the Jordan Valley stretches only some sixty-five miles from the sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea, the actual length of the meandering river is approximately 135 miles. The width of the river varies considerably from season to season and in various places, but at the Allenby bridge, 7.5 miles north of the Dead Sea, its width fluctuates from 72 to 115 feet. Early explorers report that at flood stage certain portion of the river reached a width of almost one mile. The depth of the Jordan River at the Allenby Bridge varies from 4.3 feet to 13 feet from one season to another.²⁷ During the winter and spring, especially from January through March, the highest water levels are reached.

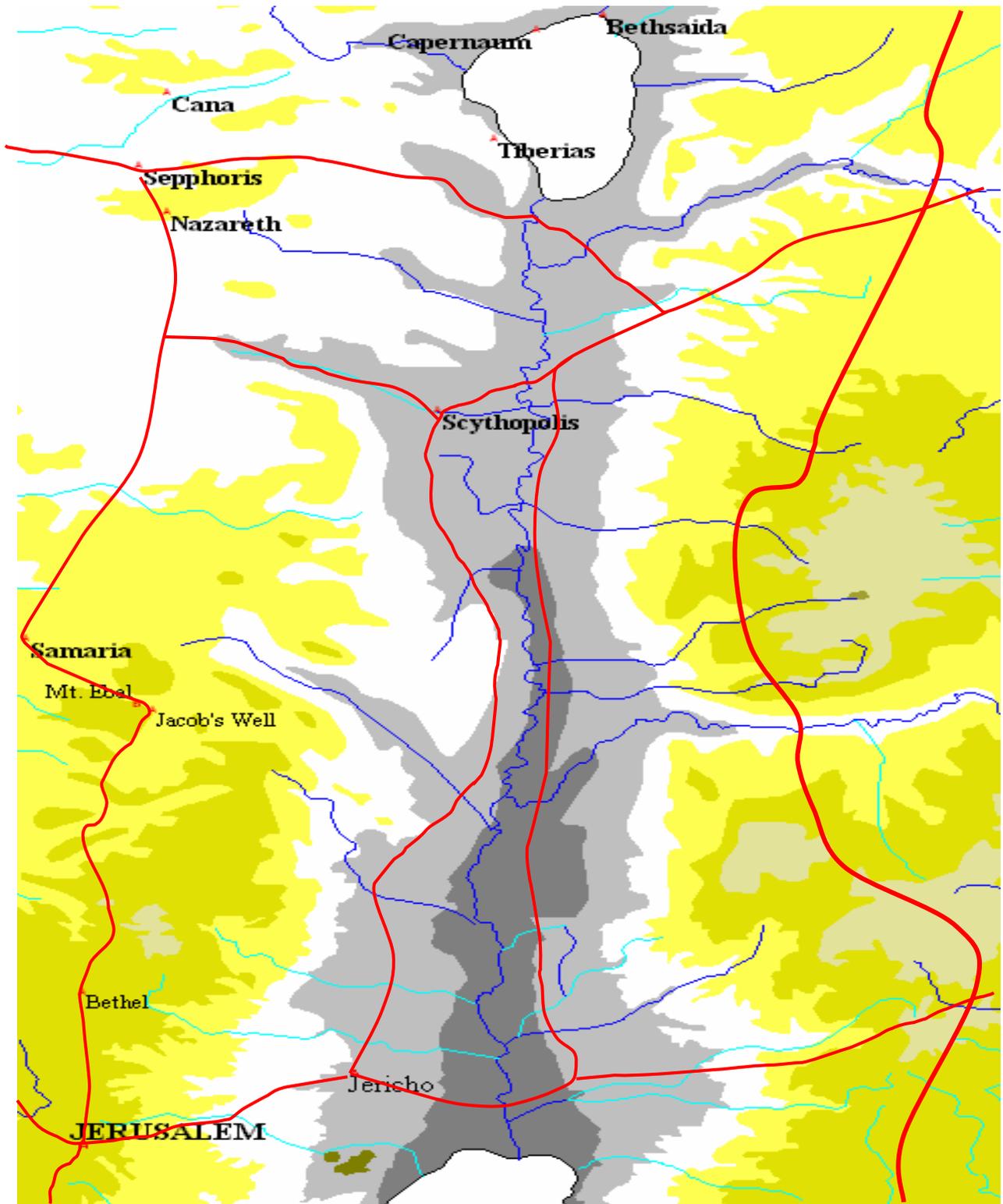
Despite the Jordan's meandering, its gradient is relatively steep and the current is strong. Travel up and down the River is almost impossible because the usually shallow, but swift waters and the numerous rapids. The Lynch Expedition encountered some twenty-seven major rapids during their trip along the length of the Jordan in 1848. There is no evidence from Biblical times that any bridges were built across the river. From the mention of "fords" in the Bible, it seems evident that these shallow areas were sought out as the most convenient places of crossing. Swamps along the banks, swift currents, and muddy or very rocky bottoms can make the crossing treacherous as one wades, swims or attempts to ride an animal across the stream. The area of longitudinal strips of land bordering the river on each side is called the *Zor* in Arabic and is referred to in the Bible as the "thicket" (NIV e.g. Jeremiah 49:19, 50:44). Each of the two strips of the *Zor* varies in width from 600 to 5,000 feet, and both were once covered with dense vegetation, including poplar, tamarisks, willow, cane, and reeds. On occasion, during times of flooding, some of the trees were almost completely covered with water. Wild animals – including lions, leopards, and jackals – were commonly found in this dense thicket. Because of the dangers associated with such wildlife, this region was generally avoided by humans and their domesticated animals, except when it was necessary to cross the river.

²⁷ *These depth variations were recorded in 1989. By that time, the state of Israel had learned to store and divert most of the waters of the Jordan floods. They have succeeded in that so successfully that the level of the Dead Sea has fallen 72 feet since 1970. It continues to fall at a rate of about 3 ½ feet per year.*

As one passes through the *Zor*, away from the river on either side, one comes to another longitudinal zone called *Qattara* in Arabic. This region is composed of Lisan marl formations of clay and gypsum, which are impermeable to water. Runoff water in this area is considerable, and miniature “badland” formations abound. This type of terrain begins some seventeen miles south of the sea of Galilee and continues all the way down to the Dead Sea. The width of these two strips of the *Qattara* varies from 0.6 to 2 miles. Because of the infertility of the soil, the region lacks a cover of vegetation, and thus the powers of erosion are magnified.

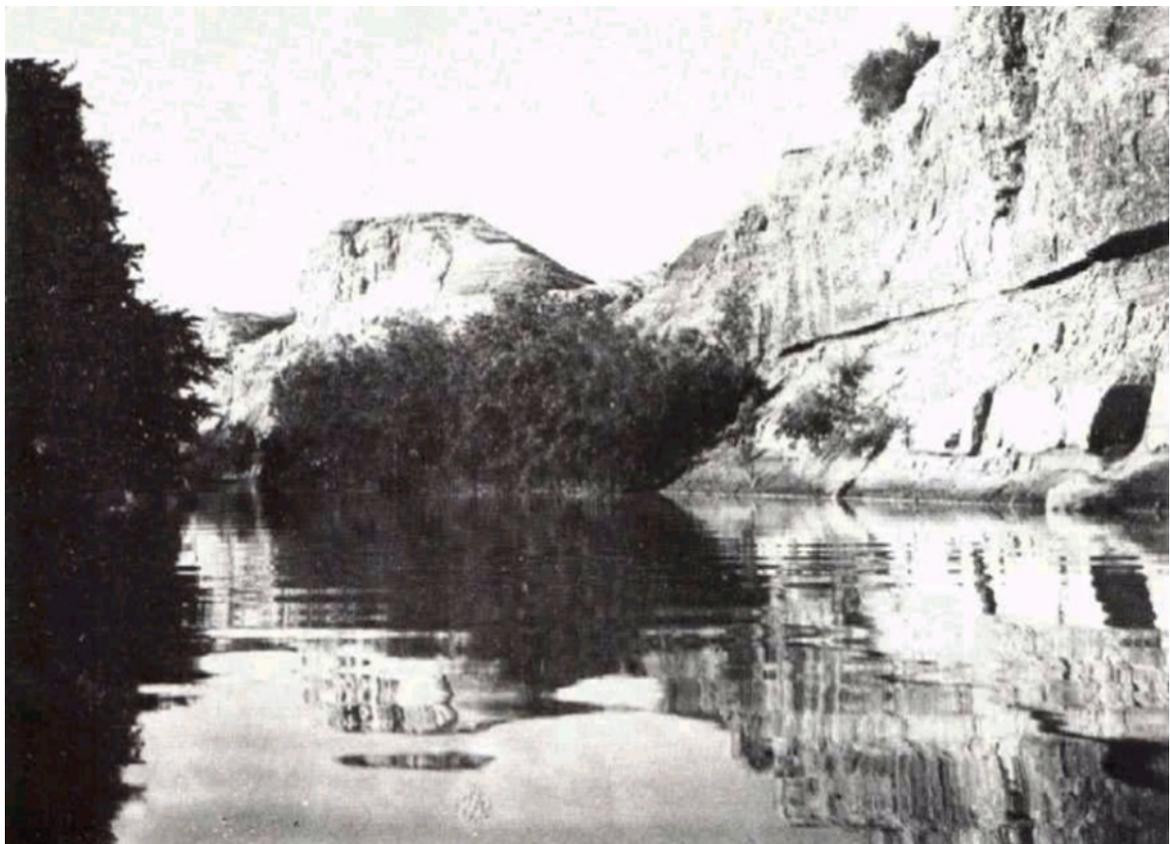
The major portion of the Jordan Valley is the area called the *Ghor* in Arabic (the biblical Arabah). It is bounded on the east by the hills of Gilead and on the west by the hills of Manasseh and Ephraim. It varies in width from 6.2 miles in the north to 2.5 – 3 miles in the middle to 12.5 miles in the Jericho region. The northern section receives sufficient rainfall to grow crops, but as one progresses southward, the amount of rainfall drops off rapidly to only 4.6 inches at the Allenby Bridge. Where there are springs, or perennial rivers (such as the Yarmuk, Jabbok, Harod, and Wadi Faria) it is possible to irrigate crops. Elsewhere scrub grass grew and was used for grazing flocks from January to March. Temperatures in the valley are warm during the winter and very hot in summer. (Jericho’s mean low in January is 50° F, its mean high in August is 102° F). Thus, although people did settle in the northern section of the valley or in the south at the oasis such as Jericho, the valley was not one of the most densely settled areas of the country.

Map of the Roads of the Jordan River Valley 1st Century AD

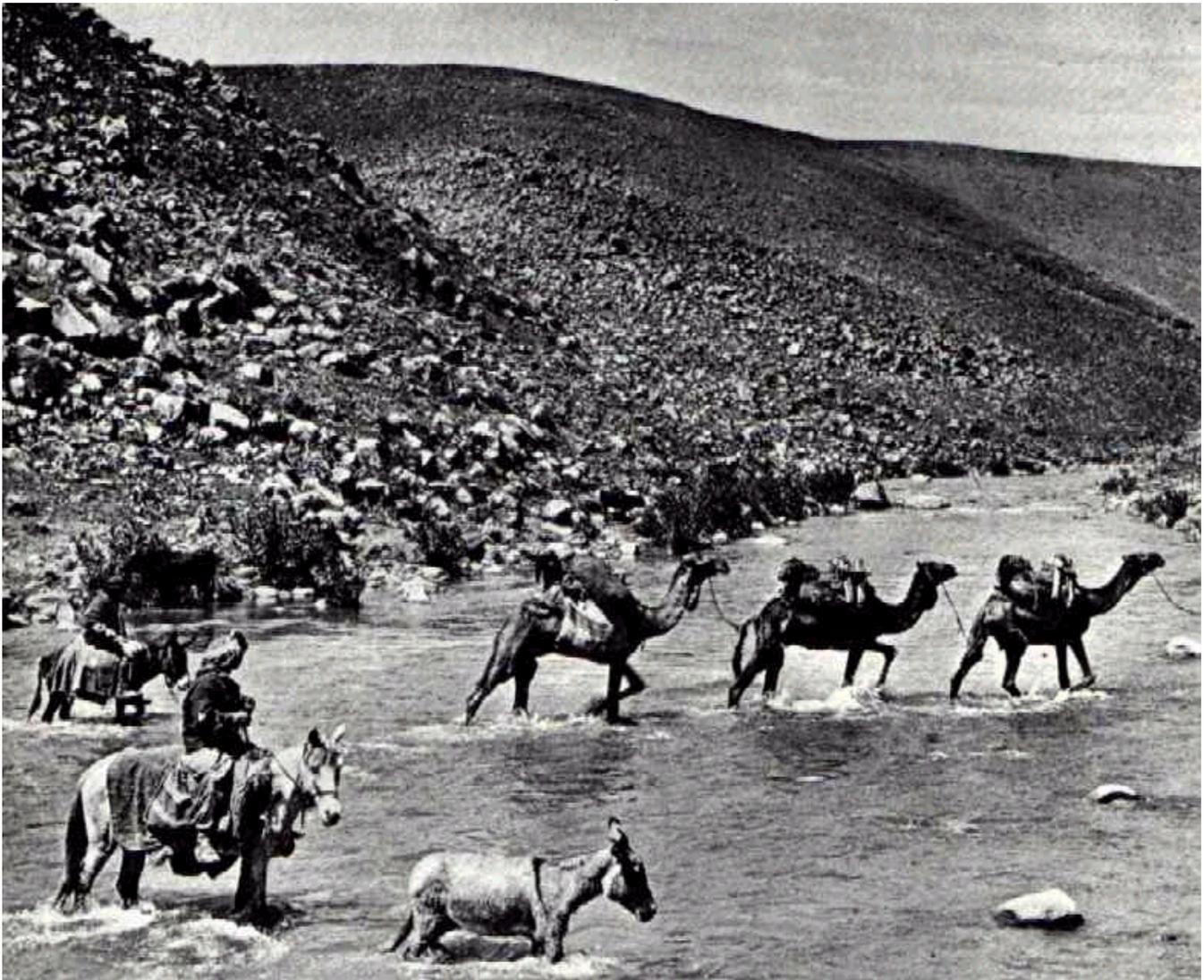




Fords of the Jordan near Jericho – 1920



Lower Jordan Midway to the Dead Sea -1920



Jordan River near Beth Shan (Scythopolis) - 1913