

Crossing Guards

My little girl calls the crossing guard at school the “crossing god.” I can’t tell if she thinks that’s funny, or if that’s how she really feels about him. And I don’t want to ask her to explain, because I think it’s funny and I don’t want her to stop doing it. Anyway, she admires him a lot. In her pantheon, her six-year-old pantheon, it’s Heavenly Father, and Jesus, and The Incredible Hulk, and the “crossing god.” She doesn’t have everything figured out yet, but she may be on to something.

Jacob had been working for his father-in-law Laban for a number of years when the word of the Lord came to Jacob and told him to go home to the land of his fathers. Laban took some convincing, but eventually he agreed to let Jacob go. So, Jacob organized his family, and his servants, and his flocks: camels and goats and sheep, and asses into a great caravan. And they headed south for Canaan. Before they got very far, Jacob, who was no dummy, realized that his brother Esau might still hold a grudge over the whole birthright thing. So, he sent word ahead informing Esau of his return. And when Esau got the news, he set out to meet Jacob with 400 men. Quite a show of force! Well, Jacob was understandably concerned; he wasn’t sure what Esau’s intentions were. But he made what arrangements he could, and he divided his family and followers into two camps or bands, so that if Esau and his 400 men attacked one of the camps then the other part of Jacob’s following could escape. Well, so Esau’s coming. Jacob is worried, and he turns to the Lord in prayer.

And Jacob said, O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the Lord who said unto me, Return unto your country, and your kindred, and I will deal well with you: I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which you have shown unto your servant. For with my staff, I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands. (OC Genesis 9:40)

When Jacob originally left his father’s home, he had to cross the river Jordan in order to go to the land where Laban lived. And now he was about to cross it again – on his way home. In his prayer, Jacob contrasts what he had when he left home, with what he is bringing home with him now. He left as a solitary figure, with only a staff, and he returns with family and servants and flocks. He returns as a wealthy man. That’s an interesting way to frame his journey, I think: naming a staff as the counterbalance to the great abundance that he acquired later in his life. Why? Why would you do that? Is the staff merely a walking stick, and a symbol of Jacob’s early poverty? Or is there something else going on?

Well, it turns out there’s an interesting back-story to Jacob’s staff. In more than one Jewish Midrash (rabbinical commentary on the Bible) as well as some early accounts from the Muslim tradition we learn that Jacob’s staff was originally cut from a tree that grew in the Garden of

Eden.¹ The story goes that God fashioned the staff Himself and gave it to Adam at the time that Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden. When Adam died, the staff passed to Seth and then from father to son thru the line of the patriarchs, until finally it came to Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob.

Now, of course, staffs (or staves) in the Bible are often used as symbols of priesthood authority. And staffs are an appropriate symbol of priesthood authority because they are used by shepherds to guide and correct and protect their flocks. Now Moses' staff and Aaron's staff are arguably symbols of Melchizedek and Aaronic authority. So, here's an obvious question to ask: "If Jacob's staff really did come to him thru the line of the patriarchs, is there any reason to associate Jacob's staff with the *priesthood* of the patriarchs?" Well, maybe. That staff was so highly esteemed, according to the old traditions, that the patriarchs faithfully passed it down from father to son for a couple thousand years. Maybe it wasn't just a knick-knack. It may be useful to think of Jacob's staff, Moses' staff, and Aaron's staff as a matched set – representing Patriarchal, Melchizedek, and Aaronic priesthood.

Getting back to Jacob's return trip, consider this. The expression, "*Crossing the River Jordan*," has long been understood by Christians to mean "*passing from the mortal world to the immortal world*." Whenever Christians talk about crossing the River Jordan, they are talking about a *one-way trip*. But as we said, Jacob made the crossing twice. As all of us do, Jacob came to Earth naked. But he didn't arrive *utterly* naked. He came "trailing clouds of glory," as Wordsworth might say. Or, if you prefer a prophet, Alma puts it like this.

"(T)he Lord God ordained priests after his Holy Order, which was after the Order of his Son, to teach these things unto the people...And this is the manner after which they were ordained: being called and prepared from the foundation of the world..." (NC Alma 9:10)

The spiritual heights to which Jacob ascended in mortality (the rungs of the ladder that he climbed) leave little doubt that he was one of those priests who Alma said were fore-ordained from the foundation of the world.

Now if it's true that Jacob's staff represents priesthood, then Jacob's reference to crossing the Jordan after leaving his father's home, *with only his staff*, suddenly makes sense. He's making the claim that he came to Earth already holding priesthood authority. And when he uses the staff as the counterbalance, in his prayer, to the souls he is escorting back across the Jordan, it implies the level of priesthood authority that he held. He was acting as a patriarch, doing all that he could to bring his family back safely to the land of his Father. Father with a capital "F." The story is, no doubt, the literal account of Jacob's life. But it's also metaphor. And although it's a neat argument for the idea that the Old Testament teaches the doctrine of the preexistence, that's not why we're talking about it.

¹ *The Eschatological Reappearance of the Staff of Moses*. John C. Reeves, UNC charlotte.

There are six times in scripture, three times in the Old Covenants and three times in the New Covenants, that the story shows up of a father figure saving his family by crossing a “water.”² Noah, the brother of Jared, Joshua, Lehi, and the Lord Himself, also each save a “family” by crossing a “water” and establishing them in a “promised land.” Although the imagery varies somewhat, the big idea is always the same.³

The fact that this theme is used in the time when the religion of the fathers was practiced, and again in the time of the old covenants, and then once more after after the law of Moses was fulfilled, suggests that the process is not obsolete. And the fact that the process is described over and over again – in many different dispensations – implies that it’s always the way that God uses to save his people whenever there is one on Earth who has patriarchal authority.

Now, let’s define patriarch. The word itself means “head father.” Patriarchs are the fathers... in Heaven. Men like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The ones to whom Elijah will turn the hearts of the children. They are vassal kings who preside over semi-autonomous kingdoms under the authority of the suzerain: *The Great King*. These vassal kings occasionally condescend to come to Earth to help save their folk – individuals, *reading between the lines*, with whom they had a pre-existent family relationship. Their role in no way supplants the Savior’s role, but it does mirror the Savior’s role. Because, they are in training to become saviors in their own right. Anyway, that’s how I’m using the term.

Now, it’s true that these six scriptural accounts of water-crossings don’t contain every element that every other of the accounts contains. There is *some* overlap, and then there are some *unique* bits that only certain of the stories have. But when we bring together the isolated bits of information from the different accounts, then a pretty complete picture emerges of what the process looks like – and, here’s the important thing, what the process will look like in our day, when there is again one on Earth with patriarchal duties. Six accounts are nice, but Jewish custom requires a seventh in the series. *Collect all seven, you get a menorah! A Tree of Life.*

² The story of Alma the elder and the baptisms he performed in the waters of Mormon is possibly another example this water-crossing metaphor. There are definite similarities with the other six accounts. But it lacks many of the elements of the other narratives: there is no ark in the story; there are not three tiers of saved, nor is there a sacred meal. There is no evidence in the story of a guiding instrument, like the Liahona. Also, Alma’s people are only rescued temporarily. For these reasons, and others, I don’t include it with the list of the other six accounts.

³ Echoes of the scriptural water-crossing metaphor are also found in Greek mythology. The recently deceased cross the river Styx to get to the immortal worlds and, after a time, cross back again and are re-born into mortality. Charon, the river man, ferries those who cross the river Styx in his skiff. Greek art depicts him standing in the bow of the boat. With one hand he steadies himself by leaning on the prow, and in his other hand, his right hand, he carries a long pole – or perhaps we might call it a staff. He is always shown as an ugly, bearded man with a broken nose and flashing eyes. It’s kind of a “marred visage” look. Here is Virgil’s description.

*There Charon stands, who rules the dreary coast –
A sordid god: down from his hairy chin
A length of beard descends, uncombed, unclean;
His eyes, like hollow furnaces on fire;
A girdle, foul with grease, binds his obscene attire.*

Here's an example of the kind of overlap that I'm talking about. Noah saved three categories of beings aboard the ark: unclean beasts, clean beasts, and humans. And Jacob crossed the Jordan, after his labors, bringing in his wake three categories of beings: flocks, servants, and family. In both cases, the three groups serve as figurative descriptions of the families that these men helped to save in the Kingdom of God. Families with members that showed varying levels of faithfulness. These accounts of water-crossings suggest that three tiers of individuals are always saved as part of the patriarch's family.

The Lord specifically directed Noah to make the ark with three levels. "*With lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it.*" So..., first class, business class, and steerage. Steerage is where you keep the steers – those without the capacity to reproduce. Or if you don't like that joke, there are those who can "sing" the song of redeeming love, those who "speak" with the tongue of angels, and on the bottom deck you find your "dumb" asses. I hope my stall has a window. There are also three levels represented in the Ark of the Covenant. If you look for it, you'll find it. And by the way, it is called the Ark of The Covenant, so that tells you the price of a ticket.

Now, speaking of arks. In three of the accounts of the water-crossing, the father figures are directed to build arks or boats. The brother of Jared, Noah, and Lehi all built boats in order to get to either a promised land, or in the case of Noah, a land that had been swept clean by the flood. In either telling, the land on the other side of the "flood" is a good place to be, free from many of the worries of the place they left – and boats were how you got there. A part of me wishes that this meant that in our day some five-star cruise ship will carry us all off to an island paradise with white sandy beaches and fruity drinks. But that's not gonna happen. Alas! There is no boat in our day. But there is a conveyance.

There's a reason that Noah's ark came to rest on the top of a mountain. It's foreshadowing. It's to draw an equivalence with the latter-day temple that will be built in the top of the mountains. I don't doubt for a minute the historical reality of the voyages of Noah, and the brother of Jared, and Lehi. But their stories are written, as with Jacob's story, to convey multiple meanings. Their boats really were boats, but they also symbolized temples. And, in a sense, the latter-day temple in the top of the mountains will also be a boat: a starship, if you will, where those that enter in will be taught to walk in God's heavenly paths.

Here are a couple of fairly authoritative commentators, talking about what lies ahead.

"The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths." The paths of God lie in the heavens. So, if you're going to learn to walk in His paths, you are going to have to learn how to walk in the heavens. (Isaiah 2: 2-3, and D.S. podcast 14, "The Heavens")

This takes us to Matthew. We already know what part of Matthew 11 means (Matthew 24 in the old scriptures), but is there more there? Here's what it says in vs. 11.

But as it was in the days of Noah, so it shall be also at the coming of the Son of Man, for it shall be with them as it was in the days which were before the flood. For until the day that Noah entered into the ark, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, and knew not until the flood came and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be.

In the end-times, there will be a prophet, like Noah. And, there will be a destruction, like the flood. A subset of the people will enter into the ark, *or in other words the temple*, and be saved. And here's where the language gets really subtle. Matthew describes both the saved and the damned with the very same words. He says: *"they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage...until the flood came, and took them all away."*

On the one hand, the wicked are inattentive to the warning words of the prophet. They focus instead on the mundane: "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage." *Planning a really great reception*. And then the "flood" comes suddenly and sweeps them away.

On the other hand, those with oil in their lamps *anxiously await* the arrival of the Bridegroom. Because upon His arrival they hope to be invited into the wedding supper. They plan a reception of a different sort. And the flood that takes *them* away is the water, the river, the great deep, whose paths they are able to walk by virtue of those things they learn in the temple.

There is a second description of the wedding supper in the account of the water-crossing on the Sea of Tiberias. This comes from the Testimony of St. John.

There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael from the city of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others, also disciples. Simon Peter said to them, I ascend to the deep. They responded to him, We go with you. They went forth, and entered into the ark; and they could not grasp anything.

But at the horizon of the morning star, Jesus stood at the sacred entry; however, the disciples could not recognize it was Jesus for the glory about Him. Then Jesus asked them, Children, have you celebrated the ritual meal? They answered Him, No. And He directed them and said, Approach the veil to the east and you will find what you seek. (T&C 171: 14, 15)

Anyway, the Testimony of St. John corroborates Matthew's double entendre about a sacred meal being part of the process of crossing the great deep. In just the same way that the Passover meal is part of the Exodus. The one meal foreshadowing the other. John's Testimony also confirms the idea found in *all* the other accounts that the crossing, in some regards, is made as a group, and not individually – although, certainly, worthiness is individual. Think about those that embarked with Lehi.

Peter said, *“I ascend to the deep.”* What a beautiful contradiction. Or maybe not? In our culture, we have lost something that came more easily to Peter and to the House of Israel in earlier times, and that is the conception of the heavens as a body of water. But that idea is still found in our scriptures.

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. (Genesis 1:6,7)

The firmament is a topic for another day. But I can’t help myself. And, the nature of the firmament, in my opinion, needs to be nailed down before we can really wrap our heads around how we “cross the water.”

Here’s a metaphor from the physical world that might help to explain the firmament. It may be a divinely designed metaphor. There are seven layers of atmosphere above the Earth. The troposphere, the stratosphere, the mesosphere, the thermosphere, the ionosphere, the exosphere, and the magnetosphere – the magnetic field that surrounds the planet. Together, these seven layers both warm the planet (making liquid water possible) and they also protect us from the solar radiation that would otherwise scrub the Earth bare, with its brilliance, and make the place unlivable – like Mercury.

Seven layers that shelter us from the light we could not otherwise abide. Seven layers that let in an increasing amount of light, the higher you go. Do these layers represent the seven rungs of Jacob’s ladder? Does even the atmosphere point to God? Are there stepping stones in the river between us and where God lives? Intermediate kingdoms where we live for a time until we are ready to continue the voyage? The higher in the atmosphere one goes the lighter and lighter, or you might say the more refined, the atomic particles become, until eventually only Hydrogen and Helium are left. Only they escape the Earth’s attraction entirely. And when they do, they are drawn towards the Sun.

Here is Psalms 148.

“Praise the Lord from the heavens. Praise him in the heights. Praise him, all his angels... Praise him, all you stars of light. Praise him, you Heavens of heavens and you waters that are above the heavens.”

And here is the second commandment (OC Exodus 12:5) which is very hard to make sense of, unless your paradigm is that the heavens are waters.

“You shall not make unto you any engraved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

The prohibition against making likenesses of things “in the water under the earth,” can’t possibly mean that the children of Israel were being forbidden from making statuettes of the

rotifers and paramecia and the blind fish in the aquifers beneath the sands of the Sinai. But it may say something about the inhabitants of the waters surrounding the globe. The children of Israel might have mistakenly believed that the inhabitants of the firmament were worthy of worship.

Anyway, the firmament is sometimes described as the “*Vault of Heaven*,” an overarching structure in which God protects His treasures. And there is “water” both beneath the firmament and above the firmament.⁴ It is with this understanding that the writers of scripture wrote their accounts of water-crossings.

Now, we’ve talked about patriarchs, and put them in the lead role. And while that may be appropriate on some level, it’s incomplete. There are no patriarchs without matriarchs,⁵ of course. In the story of the crossing of the great deep by the brother of Jared and his clan, there is a subtle indication that it is a patriarch and matriarch, together, that head up the enterprise – *not just Captain Kirk*. The brother of Jared brought 16 stones to the Lord, in order that the Lord might touch them with His finger, in order that the stones would provide light for the voyage across the great deep: two stones in each of the eight boats.

Well, it’s certainly true that in a boat with no windows, you’d want some other source of light. But are we, again, dealing with multiple meanings? The passenger manifest would almost certainly have been arranged so that someone mature would have been in each of the eight boats. No party boats in this flotilla. No boats for just the kids. What a disaster that would be.

Families would not want to be separated during such a perilous time. So, would the assignment of berths (and for that matter, births) have been organized around the family? Would the brother of Jared and his wife, for example, have been in the same boat? In order that they might comfort and guide and give light to those on that boat? And, of course, each of the other seven boats would be in that same situation. Each boat would have benefited by having aboard a mature couple that had been touched by the finger of God. The stones were real, but do they also represent couples that reflected the light they had been given by the Lord, as their families journeyed thru the deep?

⁴ Speaking of water both beneath the firmament and above the firmament. The name of the *region* where Jacob lived while working for Laban was “*Naharaim*.” That’s the area between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. “*Naharaim*” means “the highland between two rivers.” Symbolically, does it bring to mind the “firmament in the midst of the waters:” *the high land* between two rivers? The etymology of “*Naharaim*” is traced to the verb נהר (*nahar*), to flow or shine and the verb רום (*rum*), to be high. So, you might say that “*Naharaim*” is the temporary residence of Jacob/Israel, who shines/shine on high in the midst of the flow. It looks very much as if God used the geography of Mesopotamia to teach a lesson about the firmament.

⁵ The Matriarch is indispensable to the water-crossing. An homage to her may be written into the anatomy of the female form. The fluid-filled amniotic sac, that prior to mortal birth protects and cushions the innocent child, seems divinely designed to mirror the “waters of the great deep” that once insulated us from the jarring and jangling of this noisy place. And the “*breaking of the water*” mirrors the crossing of the river, and the beginning of labor.

And there might even be a third meaning in the story of the white stones. We don't currently know how to navigate the great deep. There's a lot to learn. Will we learn it, at least in part, with the aid of an "instrument" that helps us on the path – just as the brother of Jared and his crew were given white stones, and as Lehi and his family were given the Liahona? Or, in another scriptural account, as Frodo was given the glass of Galadriel to help him as he journeyed in dark places. There are precedents for the idea that a physical instrument of divine provenance will be given to us to help illuminate the way.

Well, there's a lot more we could talk about, but we're about out of time, so I'll just mention one more thing. Maybe the most important thing. Something that is appropriate to talk about today – in particular.

Forty years or forty days are significant periods of time, depending on what you accomplish during that time. Over and over in scripture these periods represent trial, testing and probation, and the trial, if passed, is followed by an unveiling. It's probably not a coincidence that the word "apocalypse" means both "unveiling" as well as "destruction on an awesome scale." When God uncovers His face it's either a very good day or a very bad day. The whole world it seems is on the edge of their seats waiting for the apocalypse. They don't know the half of it.

The Lord, after fasting for forty days, was taken by the Spirit to an exceedingly high mountain, and there he communed with God (NC Matthew 2:5). Rarely, very rarely, a servant of the Lord will also successfully endure such a probation, and as a consequence will be allowed to ascend the Mountain of the Lord. Elijah fasted for forty days and forty nights as he travelled to Horeb (OC 1st Kings 4:24), before he was allowed to climb the "mount of God." Enoch was 25 years old when he was ordained, and then at age 65 – forty years later – he was "blessed" by Adam, which allowed Enoch to ascend, and to see the Lord and walk with Him.⁶

Elijah, the man, and Enoch both possessed the "spirit of Elijah."⁷ Both of these men ascended to heaven as mortals. And if you had to say, who would you say possesses that same spirit today? And if there is someone who has that same spirit, will he ascend in similar fashion? Or, let me ask the question another way. When Jacob lead his family back across the Jordan, who would you imagine forded the river first? Who had been there before and knew the way home?

So. History's cool! But what we really care about is the future. What comes next? Well, it seems that all that happened before is about to happen again. Each Passover before eating the seder, the Jews recite the story of the Haggadah – the Exodus. Pharoah, like Laban before him, was reluctant to let the children of Israel go. You see, he thought the children of Israel were his subjects. But they weren't; they belonged to God. The story of the Exodus can be our story too. If you consider the parallels between our time and theirs, they are plain to see.

⁶ See the entry for "Blessed" in the glossary of the new scriptures. You may want to ask yourself, "Does this blessing apply only to Enoch, or will Adam also bless another, who has a similar role to Enoch?" And when and where might this blessing take place? At Adam-ondi-Ahman?

⁷ Podcast 175. Cry Peace, part 4

Moses came so close to passing his trial, but after almost 40 years in the wilderness he was not allowed to cross the river Jordan into the promised land with a family. It was left to another, to Joshua, to finish the task. Similarly, the prophet Joseph Smith lived almost 40 years in this wild place, but in the end, although he too came close, he didn't get to escort his people into the promised land either. Instead, the people wandered around in the desert until the generations that rejected God's offer in Nauvoo were all gone, and another generation and a successor to Joseph were given a chance to cross the river.

Well, happy fortieth anniversary⁸. It's 40 years today since the first day of the third month of 1983. When the crossing guard began his shift. The world might not think it's an important day, but I think Heaven does.

All the servants we've talked about today are of course only reflections of the Great Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. Without His labors none of the rest of it would matter very much.

Gordon Platt

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⁸ Blog entry BFHG, part 3. August 22, 2012. "On the first day of the third month in nine years, your ministry will begin. And so, you must prepare." "I realized that the visit must have happened in 1974 and not 1973. I had the chronology wrong." The first day of the third month, nine years from 1974, is March 1st 1983.