

Joshua 7:1-26

The Sin of Achan

The last chapter ends with, "So the LORD was with Joshua; and his fame was noised throughout all the country."

This chapter starts with a "But"...

Joshua 7:1 - "But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel."

The sin began with *covetousness* - Achan wanted more than he had.

Told to "touch not the unclean thing," Achan not only touched it, he took it.

The thing he wanted and took legally belonged to God. It was under a ban, "*cherem*" - dedicated to the Lord, things either to be killed, destroyed or placed in the treasury. So in effect, Achan was stealing from God.

Finally, he covered up his sin and kept it secret, and then lied about it when confronted.

He inflated himself, putting his own desires above the community.

His self-indulgence affected the whole community, and caused Israel to be defeated in battle. Thirty six soldiers were killed because of Achan's actions.

In the same way Rahab's mercy affected her whole family, saving them from death, so Achan's family was pulled into his sin and according to the text caused them to perish along with him.

Spies Sent Out Again

Joshua 7:2-3 - "And Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Bethaven, on the east side of Bethel, and spake unto them, saying, Go up and view the country. And the men went up and viewed Ai. And they returned to Joshua, and said unto him, Let not all the people go up; but let about two or three thousand men go up and smite Ai; and make not all the people to labour thither; for they are but few."

But this incident also revealed unbelief among all the people.

The spies counseled Joshua not to send the whole people up to war, but only a fraction of the army. This looks like an act of faith, but really it was presumptuous. God had not said to proceed differently than at Jericho. In fact, it seems He was not consulted at all.

This incident also tested Joshua and revealed areas of unbelief in his own heart.

"make not all the people to labor" -

"labor" = *yaga`* - to labor, be weary, to faint, be troubled

But this is exactly what they were supposed to "labor" for.

- **Hebrews 4:11** - " Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest"

i.e. to labor to enter into the resting place God provides, of which the Promised Land was the type.

- **Galatians 6:9** - "And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."

The result was a defeat.

Joshua 7:4-5 - "So there went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai. And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them from before the gate even unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water."

"*Shebarim*" - not a place name. The Targum interprets it as, "until they were broken."

Instead of the Canaanites' hearts melting in fear and despair (**Joshua 5:1**), it was Israel's heart that was in fear.

This caused a real shock among Joshua and the elders of Israel. Why did this happen? They rent their clothes and put dust on their heads (signs of grief) and fell down before the Ark.

Joshua 7:6 - "And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads."

Joshua seemed to lose all hope, and in his confusion he gave in to unbelief and despair, questioning the whole enterprise and God's promise.

Joshua 7:7 - "And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord GOD, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan! O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies! For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land shall hear of it, and shall environ us round, and cut off our name from the earth: and what wilt thou do unto thy great name?"

Rashi - For now they will say, 'His strength has become weakened.'

This is similar to the murmurings of the Israelites in the wilderness:

- **Exodus 16:3** - "And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Most commentators see a different spirit behind Joshua's cry. He actually refuses to believe God would bring them all this way for no reason. "Maybe we should have been satisfied with the east side of the Jordan," he muses. i.e. perhaps this is our own fault.

But although Joshua is a type of Christ, all types are imperfect. I think this incident reveals how thin the space is between faith and unbelief. We are but dust and ashes, after all. Joshua's act of grief and humility is the equivalent of accepting one's own death, saying to God, "I deserve to die, I am in your hands."

(It is similar to Peter's denial of Christ, which is interesting in relation to the New Testament parallel story of Ananias and Sapphira).

Joshua 7:10 - "And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?"

This is similar to what God said to Moses in **Exodus 14:15** - "And the LORD said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward"

Rashi says Joshua was partly to blame because he did not lead the troops to Ai, but sent them instead.

- You stayed in camp, and did not go out with them, while I said: "And who will lead them out [to battle] and who will bring them [back]." "For you shall bring the children of Israel and I shall be with you." "For he will cross before this nation and he will cause them to inherit." If you go before them, they will succeed, and if not, they will not succeed. Another explanation is: לְקוֹמָם [?], [explaining לְ [?] as: On your account] On your account this has befallen them. I did not tell you to consecrate the booty of the city.

But here God encourages and comforts Joshua. He has not abandoned Israel. The problem was Achan's sin.

Joshua 7:11-13 - "Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you. Up, sanctify the people, and say, Sanctify yourselves against to morrow: for thus saith the LORD God of Israel,

There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you."

Because there was sin committed among them, and it must be discovered, the guilt charged, and punishment inflicted.

- See **Joshua 6:18-19** - "And ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it. But all the silver, and gold, and vessels of brass and iron, are consecrated unto the LORD: they shall come into the treasury of the LORD."

Process of Discovery

Joshua 7:14 - "In the morning therefore ye shall be brought according to your tribes: and it shall be, that the tribe which the LORD taketh shall come according to the families thereof; and the family which the LORD shall take shall come by households; and the household which the LORD shall take shall come man by man."

Probably this was done by casting lots, although other accounts say the Urim and Thummim were used.

- **Proverbs 16:33** - "The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD."

- **Proverbs 18:18** - "Casting lots causes contentions to cease, And keeps the mighty apart."

Lots were cast to determine the scapegoat on Yom Kippur. Casting lots revealed Jonah as the cause of the storm (**Jonah 1:7**). Haman cast lots to determine the perfect day to murder the Jews. Also lots were used by the apostles to replace Judas (**Acts 1:26**).

The tribal chiefs gathered and lots were cast, eventually eliminating all but the tribe of Judah. Then a representative of each clan of that tribe came, and the clan of the Zarahites was "taken." Then the family of Zabdi was taken, and finally the household of Achan was left.

Joshua 7:19 - "And Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou hast done; hide it not from me."

Rashi - "give, I pray you, glory": [Because] He began to criticize the method of casting lots [by which his guilt had been established]. He said: By casting lots are you coming upon me [to establish my guilt]? If a lot were cast between you and Eleazar the two greats of the generation, it would fall on one [of you]. Said he to him: "I ask you not to find fault with the method of casting lots, through which method the land is destined to be divided."

Joshua 7:20 - "And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Indeed I have sinned against the LORD God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done:"

Rashi - He saw the children of Judah [his tribe] assembling for war [in loyalty for one of their own]; and said [to himself]: It is better that I alone die rather than many thousands of Israel be killed.

Achan's Sin

Joshua 7:21 - "When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it."

Josephus the Jewish historian says that the garment which Achan took was a royal robe woven entirely of gold. A Babylonish garment was in Jericho because trade routes crossed at the city. But also, it signifies that Babylon set the standards for style and value in the world system, even for the Canaanites. Spiritually it signifies a desire to cloth oneself with the identity of the world system.

According to some of the rabbis (Pirke Eliezer, ut supra. c. 38.), these items were all associated with idolatry; it is said Achan saw the Teraphim and the silver they offered before it, and the garment which was spread before it, and the tongue or wedge of gold in its mouth; and he desired them in his heart, and went and took them, and hid them in the midst of his tent.

It is of some interest to note that the three different kinds of objects taken by Achan — silver, gold, a garment — appear together in **Genesis 24:53** ("articles of silver and articles of gold, and garments") in a context having unmistakable marital overtones, where they appear to form all or part of the bride-price for Rebekah. By implication Achan, in receiving these same valuable items from Jericho is in a figure showing his willingness to enter into a "union" with the inhabitants and system of the land.

In fact the Talmud (Sanhedrin 44a) agrees: "Ravina said: This verbal analogy does not teach what Achan's offense was; rather, it teaches that his punishment was like that of a betrothed young woman who committed adultery, for which she is executed by stoning."

The act of covetousness fuels many biblical stories of woe -

- **Genesis 3:6** - "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat."

"Rabba says: It is learned as a tradition that the evil inclination controls only that which one's eyes see." (Sanhedrin 45a)

Also David's gazing at Bathsheba; Ahab coveting Naboth's vineyard. Jesus says that you cannot serve God and mammon.

- **Matthew 6:19-20** - Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal

Sin Uncovered

Joshua 7:23 - "So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran unto the tent; and, behold, it was hid in his tent, and the silver under it. And they took them out of the midst of the tent, and brought them unto Joshua, and unto all the children of Israel, and laid them out before the LORD."

Judgment

Joshua 7:24-25 - "And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had: and they brought them unto the valley of Achor. And Joshua said, Why hast thou troubled us? the LORD shall trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones."

Rashi - and his sons, and his daughters: to witness his chastisement, and so that they be deterred from doing as He [had done]. (i.e. some rabbis believed the sons and daughters were not killed)

Confusion is caused because the words in the first part of **Joshua 7:25**, "All Israel stoned him with stones" show a different style and tradition from those at the end of the verse: "they stoned them with stones."

The Jewish exegetes, Rashi, Gersonides, and others, maintain that the stoning (**Joshua 7:25**) was inflicted only on the beasts, and that the sons and daughters were brought there merely to witness and be warned. This seems to be the opinion also of the rabbis in the Talmud. - *Jewish Encyclopedia*

That would be in accordance with **Deuteronomy 24:16** - "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin."

Also supported by **Jeremiah 31:29-30** and **Ezekiel 18:20**. This was later expressed also in the Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot 7a, Sanhedrin 27b, and Makkot 24a.

But other rabbis maintain the family knew and participated in the sin, and therefore were all guilty.

- **Exodus 20:5** - "I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me." Rashi explains this refers only to children "who hate me" and follow in their fathers' sins.

As Maimonides argued (Guide of the Perplexed 3:32), the Torah had to deal with the worldview of people of its time. The Torah handled this problem by mitigating immoral practices as much as it could with the hope (that has not always been realized) that Jews would soon understand that what they prefer is immoral.

Leprosy Again

Re: the Babylonish garment: Remember the Leprosy analogy we saw in **Joshua 6**. If a garment was confirmed to contain leprosy it was to be "burnt in the fire" (**Leviticus 13**). This was what happened to Achan, possibly his family and the stolen items.

Rahab "hid" the spies coming to Jericho (**Joshua 2:6**) and was delivered along with her family, whereas Achan "hid" the items removed from Jericho (**7:21, 22**) and perished along with his family. In each instance the same Hebrew verb (טָמַא) is employed, establishing a clear link between the two. Achan and his family were stoned and then burned, suffering the same fate as a leprous garment.

Confession

Achan is held up by the rabbis as a model of the penitent sinner; because his public confession and subsequent punishment saved him from eternal doom in Gehenna. "Every culprit before he is to meet his penalty of death," says the Mishnah Sanh. vi. 2, "is told to make a public confession, in order to be saved from Gehenna's doom."

The Talmud even says, "Achan partook of the lot of Messiah because of his confession."

Joshua's words to Achan: "Why hast thou troubled us? So may the Lord trouble you this day," are taken to mean "in the life that now is, so that thou mayest be released in the life to come" (Sanh. 43b-44; see also *Kimchi* on **Joshua 7: 25**).

Addendum: Did Joshua have Legal Authority to Execute Achan?

According to Jewish law as taught by the rabbis in Midrashim and Talmuds as well as later code books, one cannot be sentenced to capital punishment for theft, and, in addition, an execution is only rendered when the offense is seen by two eyewitnesses who warn the culprit before he acts that his contemplated act is illegal and that its punishment is death. Since no one knew what Achan did, he could not be killed under Jewish law even if he had committed an act whose penalty was death. Without witnesses, even a confession is not enough to convict in a capital case.

The sages answer that he could be killed under the provisions of hora'at sha'ah, the "extraordinary needs of the time," which required that the usual law be ignored in this case.

See <https://booksnthoughts.com/unusual-bible-interpretations-joshua-7-part-1/>

Trouble Transformed

Joshua 7:26 - "And they raised over him a great heap of stones unto this day. So the LORD turned from the fierceness of his anger. Wherefore the name of that place was called, The valley of Achor, unto this day."

"*Achor*" = trouble, causing sorrow; from a root that means "to smite."

In Hebrew there is an obvious wordplay between the name of Achan and "Achor" - "trouble." In 1 Chronicles 2:7, Achan is called Achor. In fact, the Septuagint calls him Achor throughout.

There is an alternate source for Achan's name, though. "He was called Achan because he acted like a snake [she'iken] and caused the punishment of the sins of the Jewish people."(Sanhedrin 44a)

With the coming of Messiah, there is hope even within a grim story like this. Even this grievous sin can be redeemed and transformed through the blood His atonement.

- **Isaiah 65:10** - "And Sharon shall be a fold of flocks, and the valley of Achor a place for the herds to lie down in, for my people that have sought me."

- **Hosea 2:15** - "And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt."

The New Testament Corollary - Ananias and Sapphira

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua.

The story of Achan takes place at the initial entry into the Promised Land. In the New Testament, the story of Ananias and Sapphira comes at the initial establishment of the church. At these beginnings, both Israel and the church are vulnerable. God demonstrates swift justice to protect His vulnerable and tender shoot just taking root.

Achan stole from God, hid it and lied about it. So did Ananias and Sapphira.

- **Acts 4:32** - "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common."

Another "But" - (see **Joshua 7:1**)

- **Acts 5:1-2** - "But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet."

Ananias "kept back" part of the price (**Acts 5:2**), he uses the same Greek word as is used in the Greek Septuagint version of Joshua 7:1 where it is said that the Israelites (represented by Achan) "broke faith" by retaining for private use property that had been devoted to God.

It's interesting that Satan filled Ananias' heart to lie (v. 3) but that Ananias also contrived the sin himself (v. 4). It's simultaneous. Our free will is always tainted by the evil of the Fall, which Satan can readily take advantage of, if we step off the mercy seat.

(The fact that Ananias and Sapphira are punished separately might support the rabbinical interpretation that Achan's sons and daughters were not killed).

Luke's repeated "Great fear came upon all who heard it / the whole church" (v. 5, 11) is the focal point. This was an incident meant to strengthen faith and the fear of God among the fragile fellowship of the new church.

Both the sin of Achan and of Ananias and Sapphira point to ultimate judgment on Babylon - the world system of self-interest and rebellion that inflates us to god-like status and which rules this current age:

- **Isaiah 47:10** - "For thou hast trusted in thy wickedness: thou hast said, None seeth me. Thy wisdom and thy knowledge, it hath perverted thee; and thou hast said in thine heart, I am, and none else beside me."