

Achan's Sin
A Ten Test Typology

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Joshua Hebrew Class

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19 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל־עָכָן בְּנֵי שֵׁים־נָא כְבוֹד לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְתָנוּ לוֹ תוֹדָה וְהִגַּדְנָא לִי מָה עָשִׂיתָ אֶל־תְּכַחֵד מִמֶּנִּי:¹

And Joshua said to Achan, “My son, please give honor to Yahweh God of Israel and give to him thanksgiving. Please be open to me what you have done. Do not hide it from me.

20 וַיַּעַן עָכָן אֶת־יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיֹּאמֶר אֱמִנָה אֲנִכִי חָטָאתִי לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וְכִזַּאת וְכִזַּאת עָשִׂיתִי:²

And Achan answered Joshua and said, “Truly I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel and like this is like what I did.

21 וַאֲרָאָה בַשָּׁלָל אֶדְרֹת שְׁנַעַר אֶחָת טוֹבָה וּמֵאֲתִים שְׁקָלִים כֶּסֶף
וְלִשׁוֹן זָהָב אֶחָד חֲמִשִּׁים שְׁקָלִים מִשְׁקָלוֹ וְאַחַמָּדִם וְאַקְחָם וְהִנָּם
טְמוּנִים בְּאָרֶץ בְּתוֹךְ הָאֲהָלִי וְהִבְסֹף תַּחְתֵּיהֶם:³

When I saw in the spoil a goodly cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a single tongue of gold weighing 50 shekels, then I coveted/desired/lusted and took them. And behold, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent and the silver underneath.

¹ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* : With Westminster Hebrew Morphology. 1996, c1925; morphology c1991 (electronic ed.). Stuttgart; Glenside PA: German Bible Society; Westminster Seminary.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Background

Joshua 7:10-26 records the story of Achan, who violates the rules of “herem” which God commanded for Holy War in Deuteronomy 7:16-26. According to the Deuteronomic covenant and the instructions given to Joshua, God commanded the Israelites to devote everything in Jericho. God forbade the Israelites to take anything, but to devote, by destruction, everything: people, animals, and possessions. However, Achan took some of the devoted items, violating Deuteronomy 7:25-26:

²⁵ The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the Lord your God. ²⁶ And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction.⁴

By taking the devoted items, Achan and his family become devoted for destruction, like the things which he took. Consequently, in obedience to Leviticus 27:28-29, Joshua and the people of Israel seize Achan and his family and devote them to the Lord.

Most people have problems with the Achan narrative, or at least, feel uncomfortable with it, especially after reading about the destruction of Jericho and the annihilation of its inhabitants, save Rahab and her father’s household. Humanists condemn the massacre at Jericho, Ai, and other cities, since they consider genocide an absolute abomination.

“How can a holy, just loving God have commanded such harsh actions? Many people today are repelled by what they see as a bloodthirstiness displayed by the Israelites and the God who had demanded the annihilations of the herem. R. Goetz is representative when he states that “the book of Joshua is embarrassment enough, with its ferocity and its religious advocacy of mass murder” ... He goes on to speak of “the guilt of the living God” because of activities that, were they not committed or commanded by God, we would condemn as unspeakable and unjustifiable.⁵

⁴ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁵ Howard, David M. Jr. *The New American Commentary*. Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998, pg.184.

How could God order the extermination of an entire city: men, women, and children? How could God's chosen people do such a thing and live comfortably in the land which they took by force? Something doesn't seem right. Perhaps, as some scholars argue, later Israelites contrived the Holy War concept in order to explain the decline and fall of Israel (and Judah), and also as an after-thought, to justify the mass killing of Canaanites.

With the view that God judged the Canaanites for good reason, most Bible-believing Christians accept the divine directive to take the Promised Land. Even though the Bible does not give a full account of the sins of the Canaanites, it does record that the Lord detested their religious practices, which most likely included grotesque human sacrifice (Deuteronomy 12:31) and extreme sexual immorality (Deuteronomy 23:18). Unfortunately, this explanation adds to the problems of the Achan narrative. Was Achan really that bad? Common sense concedes that taking the devoted items was wrong, but was the stoning of Achan and his family a just punishment? Did the punishment fit the crime? After all, didn't Achan confess to taking the devoted items and hiding them? Also, how could God condemn Achan's children along with him? Doesn't God command that "...each one shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deuteronomy 24:16). At best, the story appears incongruent. At worst, the story is part of a later fabrication, as argued by Martin Noth in his Deuteronomistic History hypothesis.

Despite the aforementioned problems, the Achan narrative is critical to understanding the book of Joshua. First, the Achan narrative helps illustrate the exact nature of the war against the Canaanites and other inhabitants of the highly controversial Promised Land. Second, the Achan narrative enables the reader to get a glimpse of the character of God Himself, particularly His Justice and His Mercy. Third, having demonstrated some attributes of God's character, the narrative is a strong warning against the unforgivable sin, to both believers and non-believers.

Achan's Confession

The best starting point to understanding the Achan narrative is to understand the exact nature of Achan's confession. According to the ESV, Achan confessed, "...when I saw among the spoil a beautiful cloak from Shinar, and 200 shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing 50 shekels, ... I coveted them and took them... they are hidden in the earth inside my tent, with the silver underneath."⁶ The KJV has a similar translation, but describes the cloak as a "goodly Babylonish garment" and the bar of gold as a "wedge." In general, most popular translations agree with either the ESV or the KJV, in describing the items which Achan took.

Achan's Punishment

The next point to understanding the Achan narrative is to understand why Achan and his family were stoned. According to Deuteronomy 7:25-26, if Achan had become devoted for destruction like the devoted things he took, he should have been burned with fire:

²⁵ The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the LORD your God. ²⁶ And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction. (Deuteronomy 7:25-26)⁷

God reinforces and restates this Deuteronomic commandment in Joshua 7:15:

¹⁵ And he who is taken with the devoted things shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the LORD, and because he has done an outrageous thing in Israel.'"⁸

However, as we read the narrative, the Masoretic text does not clearly state that Israel burned Achan and his family. Instead, the text states that Israel stoned them. In seeming contradiction

⁶*The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Jos 7:21). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁷*The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Dt 7:25-26). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁸*The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Jos 7:15). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

to Joshua 7:15, the Septuagint omits any mention of burning anything by fire, whether people or possessions:

24

μ

25

μ

μ

μ ;

μ

26

μ

μ

μ

μ

μ

. (Septuagint Joshua 7:24-26)⁹

Many texts resolve this apparent disconnect or contradiction by translating Joshua 7:25 as “they burned them with fire and stoned them with stones,” keeping the object of the burning unclear, as it is unclear in the Hebrew. Some translators assume that the Israelites both stoned and burned Achan and his family. Although the Masoretic text does not exclude this possibility, it does sound odd to 1) stone them, 2) burn them, 3) stone them with stones, and 4) bury them with stones. Another disadvantage with this view is that the fate of the devoted things remains unresolved. What happened to them?

An alternative possibility is that Achan and his family were stoned with stones and then buried with stones. The Septuagint could support such a view: the Israelites burned the devoted things, but stoned the devoted people. As commanded by God in Deuteronomy 7:25-26 and Joshua 7:24, it would make sense that the Israelites burned the devoted things. However, this explanation potentially adds to the confusion. Why were Achan and his family stoned? Shouldn't they have been burned to death?

According to the Sinai covenant, Israel would have been forbidden to execute someone by fire, except in the case of taking devoted things. If Achan had merely taken devoted things,

⁹Septuaginta : With morphology. 1996, c1979 (Jos 7:24-26). Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

then he should have been burned to death. Since the Israelites stoned Achan, we should surmise that he must have broken other covenant commandments. To help resolve the confusion, we examine the Decalogue commandments and punishments:

Commandment		Punishment	Proof of Violation	Proof of Punishment
1	Deut 5:7, Exod 20:3	Death by stoning (Deut 13:10)	Assuming the golden tongue was an idol (Joshua 7:21)	Joshua 7:25
2	Deut 5:8, Exod 20:4	Death by stoning (Deut 13:10)		Joshua 7:25
3	Deut 5:11, Exod 20:7	No Explicit Punishment	Implicit (Proverbs 30:5-9)	
4	Deut 5:12, Exod 20:8	Death by stoning (Exod 31:14, Numb 15:35)	Taking the devoted things on the 7 th day when Jericho fell. (Joshua 6:15-21)	Joshua 7:25
5	Deut 5:16, Exod 20:12	Death by stoning (Deut 20:21)	Dishonoring Judah and his other forefathers (Joshua 7:16-18)	Joshua 7:25
6	Deut 5:17, Exod 20:13	Death (Numb 35:19)	Taking the cloak (see analysis)	Joshua 7:25
7	Deut 5:18, Exod 20:14	Death (Deut 20:10)		
8	Deut 5:19, Exod 20:15	Repayment and Restitution (Exod 22:1)	Achan's confession in Joshua 7:21	
9	Deut 5:20, Exod 20:16	Depends on the severity, but not capital except in capital cases – i.e. bearing false witness in a murder trial (Deut 19:18-19)		
10	Deut 5:21, Exod 20:17	No Explicit Punishment		

The last three commandments, the ones which Achan confessed to have violated, are generally non-capital offenses. For the sin of stealing, one ought to give back what one stole and give restitution. For the sin of bearing false witness, one ought to tell the truth. For the sin of coveting, one ought to stop coveting. In other words, if Achan had only violated the last three commandments, then he could have made some sort of restitution. However, Joshua did not allow Achan to make restitution, but executed him by stoning, implying that Achan had violated other commandments than the ones to which he confessed.

Unlike the last three commandments, the first seven commandments are generally capital offenses. There is no restitution that a person can make for following other gods, committing idolatry, blaspheming God, breaking the Sabbath, rebelling against parents, murder, or adultery. An offender cannot take these sins back. The Decalogue prescribes death as the only suitable punishment, and in most cases, death by stoning. This should lead us to believe that Achan violated at least one, if not more, of the first seven commandments.

The Golden Tongue

Returning to Achan's confession, in both the Masoretic Text (וּלְשׁוֹן זָהָב) and the Septuagint (μ), the "gold bar" or "wedge" is described as a "tongue of gold." This "tongue of gold" or "golden tongue" was probably an idol. Had Achan merely taken gold, he could have said that. Another clue is that the "golden tongue" was a devoted thing. Had the golden tongue been a bar or wedge of gold, then it would have been taken to the treasury of the Lord, as commanded by Joshua in Joshua 6:19. Likewise, God specifically warns the Israelites against taking idols with gold and silver in them (Deuteronomy 7:25). Therefore, Achan likely took a tongue-like golden idol from the spoils of Jericho. Rather than devoting it to destruction, he takes it and becomes ensnared by it.

It is striking that Achan does not call the tongue of gold what it probably is: an idol (אֱלֹהִים). Why does he do this? He does it to hide his sin. While true that Achan confesses to lying, stealing, and coveting, he does not confess to idolatry. In fact, Achan does not confess to any capital crimes. However, since he is executed, his transgression must have extended beyond lying, stealing, and coveting.

By taking the golden idol, Achan had become ensnared by it and had fallen into idolatry. Achan had rejected the God of Israel, followed other gods, as represented by the golden idol. Thus, Achan violated the first and second commandments. Achan's actions also make it self-evident that he blasphemed the Name of the Lord, violating the 3rd commandment:

⁵ Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. ⁶ Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar. ⁷ Two things I ask of you; deny them not to me before I die: ⁸ Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, ⁹ lest I be full and deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?" or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God. (Proverbs 30:5-9)¹⁰

From the proverb, we get an insight into Achan's heart and carefully crafted confession. The first part of Achan's confession is true: "Truly I have sinned against the Lord," but the rest of it is a carefully crafted deception: He took a golden idol, not a bar of gold.

Although there is plenty of evidence to convict and punish Achan with death by stoning, at this point, we should not stop our analysis here. After all, God did not extinguish Israel after the very similar incident with the golden calf, but in a demonstration of His mercy, God delayed His judgment. In Achan's case, God demonstrates the same careful restraint.

The Cloak from Shinar

Somehow, like the golden idol or "tongue," the cloak from Shinar also ensnared Achan and contributed to his destruction. Many translators describe the cloak as a "beautiful" or "goodly" cloak. Many popular commentators believe that Achan desired the cloak for himself, for personal wear, much like someone who would go and buy a fancy new suit. Such interpretations sound very innocent, which is probably what Achan would have wanted you to

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

believe. No one deserves to die simply because they want a new suit to wear. However, God and his agent Joshua are not fooled.

By taking the cloak, Achan sought to disinherit the Canaanites. This is similar to the Sons of Israel taking the fancy robe from their brother Joseph and selling him off to take his inheritance (Genesis 37). It is also similar to Jonathan's heartfelt desire to give his royal inheritance to David (1 Samuel 18), by giving David his royal robe. Finally, in the New Testament, we see Roman soldiers taking Jesus's last possession, his garment, and casting lots for his inheritance. By taking the cloak, Achan was essentially disinheriting the Canaanites. This was completely contradictory to the war which God was waging in Canaan.

Although true that God was giving Israel the Promised Land, God was not allowing the Israelites to take their inheritance themselves. This is not unlike a court-case where there is some dispute over a piece of property. Although one may be entitled to the property, one is not entitled to take it by force. Only the courts can do that. God is taking the Promised Land from the Canaanites. God is giving the land to the Israelites. They are forbidden to take it themselves.

The structure of the book of Joshua helps reinforce this argument. Even though God is using the Israelites to defeat the Canaanites, it is critical to note that God wins the battles and distributes all the land and its possessions to the Israelites. Even Joshua and Caleb must receive their inheritance, from God, who works through fellow Israelites. Thus, Achan, by taking the robe, was effectively robbing the Canaanites of their inheritance. In so doing, he was no better than a common robber himself.

Nine Tests

The near-scope of Achan's sin now becomes evident. He violates the 1st commandment by putting other gods before the true and living God, then he violates the 2nd commandment by

giving himself over to idolatry. He violates the 3rd commandment by deception, robbery and murder in God's Name. He violates the 4th commandment by blaspheming the Sabbath (Jericho was taken on the 7th day). Achan also dishonors his father, mother, and other forbearers, violating the 5th commandment, being a "stubborn and rebellious" son, which the text carefully illustrates by his selection by lot. By taking the cloak for himself, Achan violates the 6th commandment; he is a despicable robber and murderer. Achan also violates the 8th, 9th, and 10th commandments, which he himself testifies. Consequently, Achan has broken nine of the Ten Commandments: every commandment, but adultery. Yet, Achan confesses to only three: the non-capital offenses.

The Unforgivable Sin

Just about every commentator condemns Achan and rightfully so. After all, Achan is a murderer, a thief, a liar, a rebel, and an idolater. However, a quick condemnation should make us all feel uncomfortable. How many of us can sincerely claim not to have violated most, if not all, of the Ten Commandments? Yet, for some reason, we are all shown mercy, as long as we choose to accept it.

As God's representative, Joshua extends Achan the same mercy with an opportunity to confess his sin and repent:

And Joshua said to Achan, "My son, please give honor to Yahweh God* of Israel and give to him thanksgiving. Please be open to me what you have done. Do not hide it from me.

The Hebrew text captures Joshua (and God's) sentiment perfectly. My son, please give God honor and please do not hide what you have done. Joshua is not commanding Achan to confess, but is entreating (נַחַם) Achan to give God 1) honor and 2) thanksgiving and entreating (נַחַם)

Achan to 3) tell what he has done and 4) not to hide it. Speaking and acting as a loving Father, God is giving Achan a way out, if only he would repent and confess his sin. But, he doesn't. Much like Adam and Eve, Achan attempts to hide the scope of his transgression, by covering his sin through a false confession. He has now tested God ten times, like Pharaoh and like Israel in the wilderness. God and His Agent Joshua now have no choice. Achan has rejected mercy and has scorned God. *He has committed the unforgivable sin: he is unrepentant.* Thus, Achan is judged accordingly and stoned, according to the covenant which he himself entered (Joshua 5:7).

Background: Parallels to the Achan Narrative

The most popular parallel to the Achan narrative is the Garden of Eden narrative. In particular, we see that Achan has succumbed to the same lust of the eyes, desire of the flesh, and pride of life which entrapped Adam and Eve. Achan's confession also sounds reminiscent of Adam's and Eve's false, unrepentant confessions to God. However, within the context of the book of Joshua, the author has carefully designed the Rahab and Achan narratives to parallel one another.

Rahab and Achan must give confessions. Both of them deceive. In both cases they and their families (all who belonged to them) were at stake. If we accept the idea that Jericho "broke" the last straw trying to harm the two spies/messengers/witnesses, as Sodom did against the angels and the Israelites did against Joshua and Caleb, then we can understand the righteousness of herem or "holy war." Incidentally, we also see similar parallels in the Levite/Concubine narrative in Judges and the Gospel narratives as Jesus sends out the 12 and the 70. In each case, a group of people have so offended God that God can no longer be patient, but in His mercy, he messengers. If the messengers are accepted, then good, but if the messengers

are rejected, then the entire city or people group is condemned. Within this context, we can now understand the fate of Achan's family.

Achan's Family

¹⁶ “You know how we lived in the land of Egypt, and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed. ¹⁷ And you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them. ¹⁸ Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the LORD our God to go and serve the gods of those nations. Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, ¹⁹ one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.’ This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike. ²⁰ The LORD will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and his jealousy will smoke against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven. ²¹ And the LORD will single him out from all the tribes of Israel for calamity, in accordance with all the curses of the covenant written in this Book of the Law. (Deuteronomy 29:16-21)¹¹

The fate of Achan's family is very problematic. In his confession, Achan appears to have acted alone. Perhaps, Achan's family was the “green wood” swept away with the “dry wood,” mentioned in Deuteronomy 29:19. Although a somewhat appealing explanation, it is probably better applied to the fate of the 36 some Israelites killed in the first battle of Ai (Joshua 7:5), if applied at all.

Another resolution to the fate of Achan's family appeals to the 10 commandments:

⁸ “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Deuteronomy 5:8-10)¹²

¹¹The Holy Bible : English standard version. 2001 (Dt 29:16-21). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

¹² *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

In other words, one could argue, based on Deuteronomy 5:8-10, “the iniquity of the fathers on the third and fourth generation,” justified the execution of not only Achan but also all of his descendants. Although seemingly consistent, there are many practical and pastoral problems with such an interpretation. Just because my father is a murderer doesn’t mean I should be killed; this would be an injustice, as clearly stated in Deuteronomy 24:16.

A better interpretation of Deuteronomy 5:9, proposed by Gordon Hugenberger, is that the third and fourth generations really means a household, those living under the same roof, which would not be inconsistent with biblical times. Within this context, any family member who wasn’t an idolater would have left Achan’s household. It is interesting that the text excludes Achan’s wife. We do not know why, but it does. Perhaps, she had left him and the family, so that those remaining were all idolaters. However, even this is problematic, returning to the idea that “...each one shall be put to death for his own sin” (Deuteronomy 24:16). Achan was given one last chance wasn’t he? If God gave Achan an opportunity to confess and make right, shouldn’t Achan’s household have been given the same opportunity?

Returning to the text, we see that after Achan’s confession, Joshua sent messengers to Achan’s tent. Note that the Masoretic text and the Septuagint agree on this point; it’s odd that Joshua sent messengers, rather than men, soldiers, or even mighty men. Understanding this within the parallels of the Rahab, Sodom, Gibeah, and Gospel narratives, the situation is now clear. Achan is condemned. Joshua is giving Achan’s household one last chance; much like Peter gave Sapphira in Acts, after the death of her husband Ananias (Acts 5:1-11), or God gave Rahab and her household in Joshua 2. However, Achan’s household rejected the messengers and their message, so they too become condemned like Achan, Jericho, Sodom, Gibeah, Bethsaida,

and even the Israelites who tried to stone God's messengers: Joshua and Caleb. God is thoroughly just and merciful; He plays no favorites.

Conclusion

In understanding the herem, every scholar eventually turns to the Achan narrative. In the narrative, most readers glean that God is absolutely uncompromising. However, what we miss is that God's character, His justice and mercy, are as consistent as ever. God does not change. He is consistently just and consistently merciful. Through infinite grace, God endures the sins of persons, peoples, and even populations. However, despite his patience and endurance, God will deliver perfect justice. But even in doing so, God still desires to extend mercy, even to Achan and his household.

Unfortunately, because of their sin, most people do not respond to God with repentance, but in hostility, including passive hostility as demonstrated by Achan. We see this throughout the entire book of Joshua. Despite their fear of God and Israel, the Canaanites choose to attack God and His people. When they hear a report, their response is to fight. Within the multitudes of Canaanites, only Rahab and the Gibeonites surrender to God and put themselves at His mercy.

Unfortunately, most readers do not reach this conclusion. They see a twisted view of the truth that distorts the character of the true God. In doing so, they reject God and His salvation, and they remain in condemnation.