

Understanding the Relationship between Personal Sin and Corporate Punishment: An Examination of Joshua 7

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Abstract

Joshua 7 presents a story of personal sin that results in corporate judgment. In Joshua 7, Achan stole from the things devoted to destruction leading to Israel's judgement and defeat at Ai (7:4–5). God declared, "Israel has sinned" (7:1, 11), yet only one individual, Achan, had sinned. God links Achan's sin to their defeat (7:12) and says that Israel has become "devoted to destruction" (7:12), just like in Jericho. The only remedy was to destroy the devoted things, including Achan, his family and all his property (7:13, 15, 25–26). Some scholars suggest that the stolen things polluted or defiled the nation; others claim the issue is one of corporate personality or solidarity, while others leave it in the realm of mystery. This study seeks to determine the relationship between personal sin and corporate responsibility through discourse analysis and textual analysis. The scope of the study will be delimited to Joshua 7, in the context of Joshua 8 and 22 and any other relevant sections of the entire book of Joshua. This study has found that corporate accountability best describes the relationship between personal sin and corporate punishment. Corporate accountability reminded Israel of its responsibility to the community's overall well-being. Joshua 7 demonstrates that sin has repercussions for others since no sin is committed in a vacuum, as it affects those around us.

Keywords: Joshua 7, Personal and Corporate Sin, Corporate Judgment

Introduction

The Hebrew word **חֵרֶם** is at the heart of understanding Joshua 7. This word occurs 38 times.¹ It refers to something physical that has been designated or dedicated to God alone by God himself (Lev 27:21, 28, 29) or by human beings who give it to God, e.g., as a gift (Num

¹ Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, "H2764 - חֵרֶם Chêrem," *Blue Letter Bible*, https://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/gen/1/1/s_1001.



1:14). Those who come into association with the designated thing receive the fate of the designated thing, that is, if the thing was to be destroyed, then the person in contact with it was to be also destroyed (Joshua 7:1, 11, 12, 15, 22, 20; 1 Sam 15:21–29; 1 Kgs 20:42). It can also refer to individuals/people/nations who are designated or given to God by God himself, and in the majority of cases it refers to being designated to God for judgement (Josh 7:1, 11, 12, 15, 22, 20). Finally, it can be nations and people groups (Josh 6:17; Isa 34:5, 43:28; Ezek 26:5, 14). This paper examines how this concept played out in the corporate judgement that fell on Israel because of Achan's sin. It seeks to find out in what sense Israel could be held responsible for one person's sin and the application of this to the church today. H. Wheeler Robinson has suggested that it is because Israel had a *corporate personality*.² Mary Douglas suggests that Israel was judged because **חֵרֶם** items brought *contamination*.³ Another view is Walter Kaiser's *corporate solidarity*, where a person is seen as a group representative.⁴ This paper will interact with these proposals and examine the text to ascertain the nature of the relationship between personal sin and corporate responsibility.

Background Information on Joshua 7

Historical Context

There is disagreement as to who wrote the book of Joshua. Some scholars argue that the author is Joshua, based on the Talmud (AD 500).⁵ Internal evidence indicates that Joshua authored the book, "And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God" (24:26, ESV). The fact that 6:25 states that Rahab was alive at the time the book is being written suggests that the events of the book were recorded shortly after the conquest when the author was still alive.⁶ However, the book also records Joshua's death; hence end parts of the book must be written by someone else. Others have suggested that the author was Samuel.⁷ David M. Howard points out that the book resulted from Deuteronomist authors who compiled the history (7th – 6th Centuries BC).⁸ On the other hand, the book of Joshua employs the phrase

² Robinson H. Wheeler, *The Cross in the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1995), 77.

³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, Routledge classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁴ Walter C. Kaiser Jr, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 69.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, "Joshua," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 233.

⁶ Waltke, "Joshua," 233.

⁷ Avranel argues this in M. H Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 5.

⁸ David M. Howard, *Joshua*, The New American Commentary v. 5 (Nashville, Tenn: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 43.



“until this day” in both Joshua 15:63 and 16:10, which leads Childs to make a strong case that the book cannot go further back than the 10th century BC.⁹

Based on the argument that Joshua wrote part of the book, then this paper concludes that the date should be in Joshua’s time and perhaps completed in the reign of David. In the final analysis, the theology of the text is unaffected by the dating of the book.¹⁰

Literary Context

The book of Joshua comes after Deuteronomy, which emphasises covenant allegiance. In Joshua’s commissioning, there is a strong emphasis on keeping the Law (1:7–8). Chapter 6 forms a backdrop for understanding chapters 7 and 8. God instructed that everything in Jericho was devoted to destruction (6:18, 21) except Rahab and her family (6:17b, 22–25). Joshua 6:18 warns, “But you, keep yourselves from the things devoted to destruction, lest when you have devoted them you take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel a thing for destruction and bring trouble upon it” (ESV). Presumably, Achan knew all the instructions but violated them. Like in Ai, Israel was to bring judgement on Jericho, which was devoted to destruction (Josh 7:1), and this action resulted in a judgment for the whole nation (Josh 7:12). Only after this sin was dealt with was Israel able to stand against Ai.

In Joshua 8, when Achan’s sin was resolved, Yahweh instructed Joshua to go and fight Ai and assured him of victory (8:1). Ai was only defeated after they had dealt with the sin of Achan (8:24–29) by confession. After this, Israel renewed its covenant with Yahweh by reading out the book of the Law (8:34). Chapters 6 and 8 show God wanted the devoted things to be destroyed, and when Achan took them, both the things and Achan had to be destroyed for Israel to defeat Ai. Yahweh also treats Achan’s sin as the sin of the nation since later on, the story of Achan is mentioned as an example of how God can bring judgement on a people group because of one person’s sin (Josh 22:20). In what sense does a personal sin become a corporate punishment? This paper explores this question by examining Joshua 7.

Textual Analysis of Joshua 7 and 8

Joshua 7:1a states, “But the sons of Israel broke faith, betrayed the agreement concerning the devoted things, 1b in that Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah took the devoted things 1c. so that the anger of Yahweh burned against the sons of Israel” (My translation). Joshua 1:1 begins with the wayyiqtol form with different uses,

⁹ B. S Childs, “A Study of the Formula, ‘Until This Day.,’” *JBL* 82 (1963): 292.

¹⁰ Waltke, “Joshua,” 234.



including indicating the beginning of the next event.¹¹ This text shows the next event. First, the clause in 6:27 closes off the episode with Jericho. Second, the clause introduced by the wayyiqtol, about Israel's sin is linked to the clause following it, which expounds on what the sin in question in the first clause was. At the same time, the sin of Israel is directly connected with the defeat of Israel by Ai. This makes it more tied to the next verses than the previous ones. For these reasons, it is therefore indicating a next event.

Additionally, a wayyiqtol can also introduce a contrasting clause.¹² The wayyiqtol in 7:1, in relation to the preceding clause, is a contrast. Joshua 6:27 explains that since Yahweh was with Joshua, his fame spread; however, the following clause cites Israel breaking faith and transgressing. It is thus appropriate to start the translation with “but” instead of simply “and.”

Clause 1b is also introduced by a wayyiqtol with an epexegetical function, in that it expands and clarifies how the Israelites had broken faith and highlights that it was Achan's action of taking the devoted things.¹³ The clause is rendered “in that,” while clause 1c has the consequential use of the wayyiqtol;¹⁴ hence translated as “so that” to show that the result was Yahweh burning with anger against Israel because of Achan's action. Verse 1, therefore, becomes central to understanding the events that transpired in the chapter. The rest of the chapter seeks to expand on these three clauses, explaining the fact that Israel broke faith and showing in what ways this happened, explaining the sin of Achan and why Israel was judged for it and how the anger of God was to be appeased.

Israel Breaks Faith: Personal and Corporate Sin (Josh 7:1–4, 11)

Personal Sin: Achan's Transgression (Josh 7:1, 11)

First, as demonstrated in verse 1, Achan is identified as the culprit responsible for Yahweh's anger. The chapter repeatedly reinforces this fact (Josh 7:20, 25). The nature of Achan's sin had to do with that which was **קִדְּשׁ**. This term refers to items or people that God had declared as belonging to him, and he could do with them as he wanted.¹⁵ In this case, the things were devoted or designated for destruction. The devoted things were under a ban meaning that

¹¹ Matthew H Patton and Frederic Clarke Putnam, *Basics of Hebrew Discourse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 68.

¹² Patton and Putnam, *Basics of Hebrew Discourse*, 69.

¹³ Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York, N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 86.

¹⁴ Arnold and Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 85–86.

¹⁵ The word study is in the appendix



people were not allowed to take them.¹⁶ The danger of *חֵרֶם* had already been mentioned in Deuteronomy 7:26, “And you shall not bring an abominable thing into your house and become devoted to destruction (*חֵרֶם*) like it. You shall utterly detest and abhor it, for it is devoted to destruction” (ESV). Joshua also made this clear in 6:18, saying, “You [Israel] . . . must keep away from the things devoted to destruction (*חֵרֶם*) lest you become devoted to destruction (*חֵרֶם*) and you take from the devoted thing (*חֵרֶם*), and you designate the Israelite camp to be devoted to destruction (*חֵרֶם*), and you bring trouble upon it” (ESV). As this verse makes clear, bringing devoted items into Israel resulted in the nation becoming devoted to destruction (7:12). Since Israel had become *חֵרֶם* (7:12), God was proclaiming that he would see to it that Israel was defeated.¹⁷ God, being impartial, would punish them in the same manner that he had punished the same transgression among the Canaanites.

What was *חֵרֶם* belonged to God. The violation of this was not simply any robbery; it was stealing from Yahweh himself, making the sin very much egregious.¹⁸ The word *נִבְלָה* in 7:15, translated as “...because he has done a *disgraceful* thing in Israel” (my translation), also connotes “stupidity, folly, or willful sin, all of which are usually used in association with a transgression against God.”¹⁹ It is also used when discussing sexual wickedness, such as the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34:7. This connotation may be intended to highlight how grave and egregious this transgression is when committed against Yahweh.²⁰

Corporate Sin: Israel’s Breaking Faith (Josh 7:1, 2–3, 7, 11)

While Achan is the main culprit, Israel is also said to have sinned (Joshua 7:1,11). First, the word *מָעַל* in verse 1 carries the meaning of breaching faith or breaking faith. Israel betrayed the agreement that the things of Jericho had been devoted to destruction. This term is used in Numbers 5:12–13 which talks about a wife committing adultery. Similarly, in breaking faith concerning the things designated for destruction, Israel was breaking the “covenantal relationship between God and Israel.”²¹ Joshua 7:11 also makes clear that Israel had *חָטָא* meaning “to miss the mark” and had also transgressed his covenant. It is interesting to note that in Joshua chapters 1 through 6, the word covenant comes up in reference to the ark of the

¹⁶ Gary M. Burge and Andrew E. Hill, eds., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 2012), 468–469.

¹⁷ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 6 (IVP Academic: Downers Grove, 1996), 165.

¹⁸ Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, 165.

¹⁹ Anthony S Daw, “Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7” (*Evangelical Theological Society*, 2019), 346.

²⁰ Daw, “Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7,” 346.

²¹ Howard, *Joshua*, 342.



covenant showing that this was “....a violation of holy war that is represented by the leading of the ark of the covenant. Support for this interpretation is that the origin of the divine speech is from the ark (7:6).²²

Joshua 7:11 also speaks in the plural, “they transgressed the covenant ... they stole, and also they lied, and they put in among their own things” (my translation). This author infers that this could signal several things. First, it could indicate that Achan did not steal alone, but other soldiers did the same thing, though only he is mentioned. This, however, raises the question of why only Achan is mentioned and not others. Second, it could mean that Achan alone engaged in stealing, but other soldiers knew what he had done and did not report him. Therefore, they are indicted as well as having been complicit in Achan’s actions. This explanation makes sense of the “they,” but one is still left wondering why the consequences fell on all who went into battle and not only on the ones who hid the sin. A third explanation would be that the 3rd person plural pronoun “they” refers to the nation of Israel bringing in the collective manner in which God may be treating the sin. For example, in verse 12, Israel is spoken of as singular twice, showing it is a united whole. Daw points out that in verse 13, Israel is referred to as singular five times, indicating that they are seen as a single organism before God and three times as a collective body, indicating that they are accountable as a whole.²³

A fourth option is that “they” could refer to Achan and his family. Even though Achan’s family did not participate in the act of stealing, they may have been fully aware of what Achan did as he had hidden the stolen items in his tent. This explanation takes into account the fact that verse 11 says, “....they have stolen and also they lied and they put it among their own things” (My translation). It would also explain why Achan’s whole family was punished (7:25–26). During ancient times, families functioned as a unified entity; they formed and violated vows jointly (Jos 2:8–14, 18), and the father held the position of head of the family.²⁴

The author of this paper holds that the third person plural “they” in verse 11 refers to: first, the nation of Israel, given that in 7:1, Yahweh had already made clear that it was “Israel” that had broken faith. Also, the consequences fell on the nation (7:4–5), and the whole nation had to participate in rectifying the sin (7:13-15; 25–26). Another aspect that

²² Thomas B. Dozeman, ed., *Joshua 1-12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible 6B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 359.

²³ Daw, “Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7,” 24.

²⁴ Waltke, “Joshua,” 245.



brings the nation into view is the mention of Achan's genealogy. The genealogy of Achan is the most detailed presented in the whole book of Joshua.²⁵ The mention of the genealogy helps bring out the whole nation factor. The author could be signalling that people are not just isolated individuals. At the same time, this does not exclude the fact that the pronoun "they" could refer to Achan and his family since they are all punished (7:26). God would not have punished them for no reason. This is because God is just; he does not punish the innocent with the wicked as though they were alike (Gen 18:23–25) and distinguishes between the sins of children from their fathers (Ezek 18:20; Jer 31:29). However, Achan and his family could be representing a sinful attitude in the whole nation of Israel, as will be explained later.

Another factor that shows that Israel as a nation had sinned is that they all had to participate in identifying the sinner. The procedure for identifying the culprit is through casting lots (7:13–15) shows that God wanted the whole community to be responsible for finding out who had brought trouble upon them. However, it is essential to note that while the nation had to identify the sinner collectively, God pointed him out through casting lots. God was still leading the charge against the unholy, whether in Canaan or among his own people. Once the culprit was identified, the community was called upon to judge the sinner (7:25).

The chapter, even having made clear that Israel has sinned as a nation, also presents the other characters as having an attitude problem. For example, the spies sent to Ai believed that an army of around 2,000 to 3,000 men was sufficient, rather than the 601,730 soldiers stated in Numbers 26:51 as capable of combat.²⁶ While this report, at first glance, seems alright, it has to be read in view of the previous instance when spies had been sent out. In Joshua 2:24, they reported, "Truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands. And also, all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us" (ESV). There is an emphasis on the fact that God had given the land. The same can be said of Numbers 13, where the spies returned with the report that the people of Canaan were like giants (Num 13:33), causing the people to lose their faith (Num 14:1–4,9). Interestingly, Joshua himself was one of the spies, and he tried to persuade the nation that God was faithful and warned them about rebelling against God (Num 14:6–9).

The above analysis shows that the spies' recommendations were flawed. The soldiers evaluated their capacity to battle based on the human strength of their respective armies by

²⁵ Daw, "Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7," 18.

²⁶ Howard, *Joshua*, 343.



comparing their numbers against Ai.²⁷ Joshua 7:3 also uses the phrase “the people” and “the whole people,” which is singular in Hebrew. This may be pointing to the fact that a united Israel functioning as a singular unit should have gone into battle, but the spies, in their overconfidence, did not want to task the whole people.²⁸

Following the spies’ advice, Joshua allows the soldiers to go into battle, indicating his slack attitude or irresponsibility on his side.²⁹ Joshua’s attitude problem shows all the more as he seeks Yahweh’s explanation for why they lost the war. His response may be compared to his reply in Numbers 13–14, where he displayed great faith in the face of the Israelites’ complaints (Num 14:2–4). However, in Joshua 7, Joshua is the one who complains (7:7). His enquiry sounds very much like the line of questioning the Israelites had whenever they ran into trouble in the wilderness and questioned God’s goodness or power (Exod 16:3; 17:3; Num 11:4–6; 14:2–3; 20:3–5). Burge and Hill also see these comments by Joshua as a complaint.³⁰ The phrase “Ah my Master, Yahweh” is used at the beginning of the complaint, which makes it seem more personal and intimate.³¹ The same phraseology in Jeremiah 1:6, 4:10, and Ezekiel 9:8 introduces complaints against Yahweh. Joshua is presented as having a sin problem. However, Joshua’s complaint in verse 7 is counterbalanced by his concern for the name of God in verses 8 and 9.

Israel Judged: Consequences of Achan and Israel’s Sin (Josh 7:4–5)

According to Joshua 7:5, Israel lost the fight, and 36 people were killed. This figure may be contingents which probably had about fifteen men each, meaning that the loss of 36 contingents amounts to an 80% loss.³² This explains Joshua and Israel’s shock and grief. However, if the number is taken at face value as 36, it does not mean that Joshua would not have been shocked, given that he expected Israel to win all fights. If only 36 soldiers died, then it was mercy from God. Joshua 7:5 says that “hearts of the people melted and became like water” (My translation), which is also what the Canaanites say in Joshua 2:11. Israel, due to breaching the covenant, is treated like the Canaanites.³³ This says something about the impartiality of God.

²⁷ Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12*, 356.

²⁸ Richard S. Hess, “Joshua,” in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message.*, ed. D. A Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 379–422.

²⁹ Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, 161.

³⁰ Burge and Hill, *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary*, 472.

³¹ Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12*, 357.

³² Waltke, “Joshua,” 244.

³³ Howard, *Joshua*, 344., 344.



Israel lost the battle because of sin (7:12), “Therefore, the sons of Israel could not stand before their enemies... because they have become devoted to destruction” (My translation). While we can attribute Israel’s loss to their overconfidence and poor military strategy, verse 1 clarifies that it was because of God’s anger. Some scholars argue that “their overconfidence...was the result of Yahweh’s anger leading them to destruction, not the reason for defeat.”³⁴ They had a sinful attitude of being presumptuous about God. The sin of Achan constitutes the most serious sin, but it is also a sign of the wickedness of the whole community.³⁵

Relationship between Achan’s Personal Sin and Israel’s Sin (Josh 7:1, 11 and Ezek 18)

There are several ways to understand the relationship between Achan’s and Israel’s sins and why they affected the nation. One proposal that has been suggested is *corporate personality*. H. Wheeler Robinson developed this concept in anthropological studies. According to this theory, traditional cultures were characterised by totemic practises, a rudimentary level of social organisation, and an absence of differentiation between individuals and groups.³⁶ In such societies, an individual might not have done anything at all yet still be held accountable for the acts of the collective.³⁷ This was a mindset that existed before logical reasoning.³⁸ Robinson contends that such an idea was prominent in the OT but was gradually phased away as Israel kept evolving and growing in the notion of individual rights.³⁹

However, there is no basis for arguing that Israel developed from a corporate personality mindset to an individualistic one over time.⁴⁰ From early on, the OT could distinguish individual and corporate life.⁴¹ For example, Deut 24:16 states, “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin” (ESV). This verse shows that from early on, unlike Robinson’s theory, Israel could differentiate between guilty persons, even

³⁴ Dale Ralph. Davis, *Joshua: No Falling Words*, FB (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000), 59.

³⁵ Joshua Berman, “Collective Responsibility and the Sin of Achan (Joshua 7),” *Biblical Interpretation* 22, no. 2 (2014): 7.

³⁶ Daw, “Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7,” 3.

³⁷ Daw, “Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7,” 3.

³⁸ Walter C. Kaiser Jr, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 68. Citing John W. Rogerson, “The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-Examination,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, ed. Bernhard Lang, *Issues in Religion and Theology* 8 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 6.

³⁹ H. Wheeler, *The Cross in the Old Testament*, 77.

⁴⁰ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 69; Joel S. Kaminsky, “Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal for the study of the Old Testament* 196 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995). Cf. Deut 24:16

⁴¹ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 68. citing Rogerson, “Re-Examination,” 7.



within the family level. This verse does not contradict the judgements rendered in Joshua 7 but rather reinforces that, in Joshua 7, Achan's family must have been culpable in Achan's sin in some way, even if not explicitly mentioned. At the same time, even at the national level, God still ordered that Joshua and the community find the specific offender and punish him and Achan, when he was caught, took responsibility for the sin himself.⁴² The idea of corporate personality is, therefore, inadequate, as it does not sufficiently consider this aspect.

A second proposal is that ancient communities had primitive thinking, including the belief that coming into contact with something unclean or banned would result in *contamination*.⁴³ This would imply that Israel was required to cleanse the community by destroying Achan and his family for Israel to be considered clean again.⁴⁴ Although Israel was not responsible for the transgression, they were nonetheless contaminated. Israel was responsible for keeping a clean environment for Yahweh to reside in; hence, Yahweh's anger fell on Israel since Yahweh needed to protect his holiness.⁴⁵ However, when evaluating this viewpoint, it is essential to highlight the fact that God was not only concerned with maintaining his own holiness but also Israel's (Deut 20:16–18). This author disagrees with the conclusion that the atonement for Achan's transgression may be reduced to a simple "purification ritual." Daw agrees with this and views it simply as "communal judgment not priestly purification."⁴⁶ Moreover, the assertion that Israel was not responsible for Achan's wrongdoing does not adequately explain passages in the text in which Israel is described as having sinned (7:1, 11). If we are going to comprehend the meaning of those texts, some degree of responsibility must be involved.

Another view that has emerged is Walter Kaiser's view which he called *corporate solidarity*, as explained below,

There are at least three factors involved in defining solidarity. The first is unity. The whole group was often treated as a single unit . . . The second factor can be seen in a single representative figure who often embodies the whole group... The third factor is the oscillation from the representative to the group where the individual was the embodiment of the group and the group was treated as an individual. The classic case of this phenomenon in Scripture is that of Achan who sinned when he took

⁴² Kaminsky, "Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible," 323.

⁴³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

⁴⁴ J.R. Porter, "The Legal Aspects of the Concept of 'Corporate Personality' in the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum* 15, no. 3 (1965): 371–372.

⁴⁵ Kaminsky, "Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible," 343.

⁴⁶ Daw, "Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7," 7.



the banned items, yet the text clearly affirmed, ‘Israel has sinned’ . . . even though it is Achan who says, ‘I have sinned.’⁴⁷

While corporate personality holds that an individual cannot be separated as a conscious individual from the community, Kaiser’s perspective acknowledges that OT has individual and corporate aspects.⁴⁸ Achan is an example of an individual serving as a representation of the whole community and embodying the sin that he committed.⁴⁹ However, this proposal implies that sins committed by a society are considered collectively because its members are bound by a covenant and, as a result, operate as a singular entity. This view would take Achan as an embodiment of Israel, which the text does not present. At the same time, this view does not adequately deal with the guilt of the individual members in Israel, and in this case, the characters in the discourse, such as the spies, soldiers, and Joshua.

This paper adopts the view that the relationship is one of *collective accountability*. While Achan is the main culprit (7:1), he is not the only culprit. All other characters in the passage have flaws worthy of judgement; therefore, Achan’s sin indicates a problem in the whole nation. This view suggests that we should recognise that Achan, just like all of us, was a member of a community hence presumably affected by the attitudes and mindsets and surrounding cultures. Therefore, Israel was having a sin problem, and Achan manifested that problem by stealing the forbidden items. Achan is, therefore, not a representative of the people but a representative of the collective sin problem among the people. This position is supported by Berman, who argues that,

. . . . Achan’s sin was born out of a social milieu and collective frame of mind. . . . Common experiences, shared identification and solidarity produce actions and attitudes within individuals. We may view Achan . . . [and the spies] as representative of the spirit within Israel. . . . Achan did not fail alone. The people collectively had failed.⁵⁰

Sin cannot be atomised, that is, the fact that God went through every unit of the Israelite community may suggest culpability.⁵¹ Israel is held accountable because, even though God does not transfer sin to another person, he can transfer the punishment to another person if the person holds sins of a similar attitude or manner. In Joshua 7, this is seen when one considers the following: first, Achan taking the devoted things (7:1) displays a disregard for Yahweh’s instructions in 6:18. He disregarded what his actions would result in for the

⁴⁷ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 69.

⁴⁸ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 69.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁵⁰ Berman, “Collective Responsibility and the Sin of Achan (Joshua 7),” 115.

⁵¹ Daw, “Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7,” 25.



whole nation, even when he saw the devastation of defeat (7:5). Achan presumed that no one would know his sin (7:1), that Yahweh would not follow through with judgement (6:18) and that he would not get caught as lots were being cast (7:16-18). The other characters mentioned in the text are the spies who presumed God and placed their confidence in their numbers rather than in Yahweh (7:3). Finally, with Joshua, as he addressed Yahweh, enquiring why they had lost in Ai (7:7), as explained before, he starts us with words resembling Israel's complains in the wilderness, presuming that they should have won. This shows a similar sinful attitude running with all major characters mentioned in the passage; hence, judgement can rightfully fall on them.

Another example of this similar attitude is when Achan refers to the items he stole as "spoil" in 7:21 and not "devoted things." This is because he believed that these items were earned from war, as though he had gotten them from his strength, forgetting Yahweh had supernaturally intervened, and hence all items left belonged to him. This self-reliance on personal strength is similar to the attitude that the spies and soldiers showed when they relied on their numbers instead of Yahweh (7:3). Yahweh could rightly punish them because, while the sins are not identical, they still carry the same underlying cause.

Ezekiel 18 helps to understand how collective accountability works. Ezekiel 18 is a response to the proverb "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (18:2 ESV) that referred to the fact that Israel was in exile due to the sins of their fathers. In this chapter, God repeatedly affirms that a righteous person should not die due to his father's sin (18:5-9), while the sinful person will receive his just judgement and die (18:10-13). It then says that if an evil man's son should repent and turn to righteousness, then the son would not die (18:14-20). Finally, it affirms that each person would bear the consequences of their sin.

In this passage, God is not reversing the concept of collective accountability for individual responsibility. God had said that he would visit the sins of the father on the son to the third and fourth generation (Exod 34:7; Num. 14:18), but God is also clear in other verses that carry the same sentiment that this judgement is visited on the sons "of those who hate me" (Exod 20:5; Deut 5:9). Ezekiel 18 argues that children of evil parents, need to turn from their parents' ways or judgement will likewise fall on them (18:14-18). This means that while sin can flow from generation to generation and hence judgement, each generation has its own choice as to whether they will make the same sins that brought judgment on the previous generation.



Ezekiel 18 is therefore not introducing a new concept or bring a reversal since Deuteronomy had clearly stated that “the fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers” (Deut 24:16, ESV). Ezekiel 18 simply emphasises that God is just even when he judges corporately.⁵² This text also shows that no generation is doomed by the sins of the previous one. A child who sees his parents’ sin can choose to act oppositely and turn to righteousness (18:10–13), reinforcing that while the family and community aspect is still there, individual responsibility is not obscured.⁵³ This means that collective accountability comes in when a group, or in this case, the covenant community, is perpetuating the same sinful attitudes. Hence, even though one person’s sin is at the forefront, God can still rightfully judge the whole group. It is the case with Joshua 7, where Achan’s sin prompts Yahweh’s anger (Josh 7:1), but at the same time, all other characters that follow have a similar attitude. This can be used to argue that Achan’s family in Joshua 7 must have been culpable for the sin. They may have seen what their father did, and they did not come forward with the information even when the lots were being cast. They did not turn from their father’s wickedness

Regarding the punishment of Achan’s family, aside from Ezekiel 18, there are passages in Israel’s covenant that deal with this issue. For example, Exodus 20:5 ESV says, “... for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me...” (cf. Exod 34:6–7; Deut 5:9). The phrase “third and fourth generation” shows that Yahweh is not only worried about the current generation’s idolatrous sins but also worried about the future ones. Also important is the phrase “of those who hate me” in Exodus 20:5, which shows that the next generations are judged for their own sins, not just those of their fathers. This is because children often learn from their parents and surroundings. This sentiment is repeated in Jeremiah 32:16–19 (ESV), which says,

... You show steadfast love to thousands, but you repay the guilt of fathers to their children after them, O great and mighty God, whose name is the Lord of hosts, great in counsel and mighty in deed, whose eyes are open to all the ways of the children of man, *rewarding each one according to his ways and according to the fruit of his deeds.* [Italics mine].

When Jeremiah wrote this, Israel was undoubtedly going to exile, but because they had engaged in the sin of their fathers. So these two truths have to be held together that when

⁵² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, Ky: J. Knox Press, 1990), 148.

⁵³ Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel*, 150.



Yahweh punished the Israelites for the sins of their fathers, it was also because the current generation had engaged in similar sins.

These texts help us understand this paper's position regarding Achan and his family being punished (Joshua 7:25-26). This paper has argued that Joshua 7:11, where the text says, "they" stole and "they" have hidden the items in the tent while referring to Israel corporately, still refers to Achan and his family, who, while not mentioned explicitly, may have participated in the sins of their father.

Israel Rectifying their Sin (Josh 7:13-26)

In rectifying the problem, Yahweh directs Israel needed to be "consecrated" (7:13), showing that this is not just an ordinary theft case.⁵⁴ As lots were cast, someone was "captured." The verb translated as "captured" is the same one used to refer to capturing an enemy.⁵⁵ This paper translates it this way because the chapter is about war and the destruction of God's enemies. The process is also presented as a "swift capture [like with] the capture of a city [not] a relaxed selection process."⁵⁶ Achan was "captured" from his house. "Though Achan was married and had children, he belonged to his grandfather's household."⁵⁷ This is the household "...that everyone was trained in the traditions, rituals, and ethical mores of Israel's faith. In other words, the [house] provided the individual with the most basic sense of ethnic and religious identity, affections, and mutual responsibilities."⁵⁸ It was "the focus of the religious, social, and economic spheres of Israelite life and was at the centre of Israel's history, faith, and traditions."⁵⁹ King and Stager agree that "house" was considered more fundamental than the family that one came from.⁶⁰

The punishment that God declared for the guilty party was death by fire (7:15), which was how Jericho (6:24) and Ai (8:8-9) and other cities (11:6, 9, 11) were destroyed. Eventually, God picked out Achan (7:18). All through this process, Achan had the option of coming forward, but he did not. Before the judgement was rendered, Joshua allowed Achan to confess his sin (7:19). Achan accepts that he had sinned but did not use the same words

⁵⁴ Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12*, 359.

⁵⁵ Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, 166.

⁵⁶ Hélène Dallaire, "Joshua," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed., vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 905.

⁵⁷ Richard S. Hess and M. Daniel Carroll R., eds., *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2003), 61.

⁵⁸ M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas), "Family in the Prophetic Literature," in *Family in the Bible: Exploring Customs, Culture, and Context*, ed. Hess Richard S and Carroll R (Rodas) M. Daniel (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 105.

⁵⁹ Philip J King and Lawrence E Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 39.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 36, 39.



that God had used, which is that he had “broken faith” (7:1) and “transgressed the covenant” (7:11). This could be an indication that he only casually thought he had “missed the mark” but did not understand the severity of his actions. In verse 20, Achan says he “saw...desired... and took.” (My translation). These are the words used in Genesis describing the fall (Gen 3:6). Just like Eve, this was an act of rebellion against Yahweh.

In confessing his sin, Achan explains that he stole from the נָשָׁלַל, which refers to “spoil, plunder, booty.”⁶¹ He does not refer to the items as תְּרוּמָה which is “devoted things,” showing that he views the items from Jericho as things earned from war. This was the fruit of his labour and strength, not God’s intervention such that they belonged to Him. This self-asserting and self-assurance is the same attitude that Joshua and the soldiers had; hence they did not consult God (7:3). It is no wonder that judgement fell on them.

With the confession made, it was time for judgement. Verse 24 once again shows collective accountability. The text says וַיַּעֲלֵם “They bought them up” (my translation), indicating that all of Israel participated in Achan and his family to their place of judgement.⁶² Achan and his family were stoned and burned (7:25-26). Judgement was carried out in the valley of Achor, which means “make trouble.” This word “...signifies the creation of confusion or disorder that brings about ruin.”⁶³ Verse 25 makes clear that it was Yahweh who judged Achan and his family because they were תְּרוּמָה. All of Israel participated since they had been indicted (7:1) and had to show their commitment to deal with all that is תְּרוּמָה. Verse 26 reveals Yahweh turned from his anger.

Some people would argue that the penalty delivered to Achan was too high. We need to consider the following things: first, Yahweh had extended grace to Achan and his family to come forward and confess, but Achan had hardened his heart. Second, Yahweh dealt justly and showed no partiality with Israel, as he had done with Jericho. Third, it could be that our view of sin is so small and hence we see this as too harsh. Finally, Yahweh needed to make it very clear to the covenant community the importance of the Canaanites being entirely destroyed if Israel was going to live up to its missional mandate without being influenced by the surrounding communities into sin.

⁶¹ “H7998 - Šālāl - Strong’s Hebrew Lexicon (Wlc),” *Blue Letter Bible*, accessed May 23, 2023, https://www.blueletterbible.org/wlc/gen/1/1/s_1001.

⁶² Daw, “Covenant and Community: A New Proposal for Understanding the Relationship between Achan and Israel in Joshua 7,” 347.

⁶³ Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12*, 361.



Israel Battles Ai again and Renews its Covenant (Josh 8)

In chapter 8, the battle against Ai, interrupted by Achan's sin, is resumed after the sin has been dealt with. The chapter opens with a promise by Yahweh that He had handed Ai into Joshua's hand (Joshua 8:1). In contrast to chapter 7, Yahweh leads the fight by giving instructions which Joshua followed, instead of placing his confidence in the strength of their numbers as before (7:3). Even though Yahweh had assured them victory (8:3b), he still instructed that a large force be sent of 30000 men (8:1) to fight Ai which had 12000 men (8:25). This could have propped up even more self-reliance, but Israel's confidence was that Yahweh had given them the city (8:7). Israel followed Yahweh's instructions (8:8). Ai was besieged and destroyed (8:24-26).

Israel's covenant renewal is a fitting conclusion to this entire episode since 7:1 begins by stating that Israel had transgressed the covenant. While building the altar, they utilised stones that had not been cut, which may have reminded them of the necessity of relying on God and not oneself. They offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. Burnt offerings were meant to make atonement for their sin (Lev 1:1-17). The peace offering (Lev 7:11-21) could be given as a freewill offering to thank Yahweh for his goodness, or after one has fulfilled a vow they made to Yahweh or after Yahweh had saved one in a time of peril. All these reasons can explain why Israel made the peace offering, as they thanked Yahweh for victory and that they had fulfilled the vow that קָרָם required. Joshua 8:33 says, "all Israel," once again bringing out the corporateness of Israel.

Personal Sin and Corporate Responsibility: Adam, Christ and the Church

The personal and corporate relationship is at the heart of the doctrine of original sin. Adam and Eve willingly sinned at the serpent's temptation (Gen 3:6). In Romans 5:12, Paul makes clear that because of Adam, "... one trespass led to condemnation for all men..." (verse 18, ESV). His sin is imputed to all humanity. Grudem argues that this verse somehow shows that God, who exists outside time, saw "...Adam's guilt as belonging to us and as the standard of goodness and righteousness, then it must be true that Adam's sin does in fact belong to us."⁶⁴ This does not mean that we are punished because of Adam's sin, but rather what is imputed to us is the "guilt and tendency of sin with which we are born."⁶⁵ It is still our sin, not Adam's sin (Rom 5:12b). This may still look unfair to us, but we have to remember that God promises that he "will render to every man according to his works" (Rom 2:6, ESV), and "the

⁶⁴ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Grand Rapids, Mich: Inter-Varsity Press ; Zondervan, 1994), 604.

⁶⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 604.



wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done” (Col 3:25, ESV). Therefore, God must have a way of imputing Adam’s guilt to us while rightfully judging each person’s sin.

This fact alone that we are all guilty and deserving of punishment helps us understand why we cannot fault God when he brings judgement on people who, with our human eyes, look innocent. The fact is, no one is innocent. We all “go astray from the womb...” (Psalm 58:3, ESV) and are “... by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph 2:3, ESV). This means that when God brings judgement on communities, it is still because all individual members of that community are sinners in one way or another, even if not in the sin that is in view in the specific narrative.

In Christ, this is reversed; personal sin and corporate responsibility became corporate sin and personal responsibility, as shown in the last servant song (Isa 52:13–53:12). Isaiah 53:5 says, “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds, we are healed” (ESV). The servant songs are prophetic of Jesus (Acts 8:32–33). By His suffering, Jesus bore the penalty we deserved, and in Him, we became God’s righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus takes personal responsibility for his people’s corporate sins. The church, in Christ, becomes identified with him (Acts 9:4; Rom 6:3–4) and also with one another such that it is treated as one body (1 Cor 12). 1 Cor 12:12 argues that “For just as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body—though many—are one body, so too is Christ” (ESV). The above reasoning explains why dealing with sin is a corporate process (Matt 18:15–20). Again, 1 Cor 5:9–13 also shows us that Paul required the church to deal with the sinful person in their midst unless he repented. According to 1 Corinthians 5:2, the sinner had to be removed, and they were to “... deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh...” (verse 5, ESV). The reason such drastic measures are to be undertaken by the whole community is that, as Paul explains, “....Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?....” (verse 6–7 ESV). And Paul concludes by saying, “....Purge the evil person from among you.” (verse 12 ESV)

This shows that the corporate nature of the covenant from the OT does, in a sense, continue into the New covenant. The difference is that the new covenant community is not called to execute anyone, only to put them out of the fellowship. This should not be seen as trivialising the issue since being put out of the fellowship means being cut off from the avenues where one would hear the Gospel and repent. One risks being lost for eternity.



Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between personal sin and corporate responsibility by analysing Joshua 7. First, Achan's personal sin caused Yahweh's anger (Josh 7:1, 20, 25). Achan's offence included *חֵרֶם* which refers to items or persons that God had devoted to destruction. Bringing devoted items into Israel caused the nation to become committed to destruction (7:12; cf. 6:18). While there is personal sin, there is also Israel's corporate sin (7:1, 11), as demonstrated by other characters in Joshua 7. The spies relied on their numbers rather than God. Joshua heeded the spies' instructions, showing some slackness, and he complained when asking Yahweh why they lost (7:7). They were presumptuous and self-reliant; hence the nation was judged (Josh 7:5).

This paper has examined various ways Israel may be responsible for Achan's wrongdoing. H. Wheeler Robinson's corporate personality, Mary Douglas' contamination perspective, and Walter Kaiser's corporate solidarity are proposals that have been made to resolve this issue. This study contends that these hypotheses are inadequate and argues for corporate accountability instead. Achan's wrongdoing is symptomatic of a national issue since other people in the text have their sin problems. It shows that Achan, like us, was part of a community and likely influenced by it. Ezekiel 18 has been used to illustrate that even when God judges corporately, he still ensures that people are not punished for the sins of their parents (18:5-9). According to God's decree (7:15), the guilty party was to be put to be destroyed, just like Jericho (6:24). After this, Israel defeated Ai (Josh 8:1-29) and renewed their covenant commitment (Josh 8:30-35).

This study has also argued that original sin involves this concept of personal and corporate guilt. Although Adam's sin affects humanity as a whole (Rom 5:12), God still judges personal sins rightly (Rom 2:6). Since no one is guiltless (Psa 58:3; Eph. 2:3), we cannot blame God for punishing persons who seem innocent to us. However, in Jesus, corporate sin is punished by Jesus bearing personal accountability for the covenant community's wrongdoing (Isaiah 52:13-53:12). In Christ, the church is one body (1 Cor 12) and hence church discipline is corporate (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:9-13). While today we may not be able to tell how sin has affected others, we know it is an interconnected web that maintains and perpetuates more sin.⁶⁶ Since no sin is committed in a bubble, the wrongdoer represents the ills of the larger society.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Jerome F. D Creach, *Joshua: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 147.

⁶⁷ Creach, *Joshua: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 150.



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