

חרם as a Contaminant in Joshua 6 and 7: Is Achan “Sinner Zero?”

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Hebrew Pronunciation Quick Guide:

חרם → ḥērem שלל → shālāl

Introduction

After the Israelites famously defeat the city of Jericho (Joshua 6), they lose their next battle at the city of Ai (Joshua 7). When the Israelites inquire why, they learn that the loss was divine retribution because one of the Israelite soldiers, Achan, stole materials from Jericho that were meant for total destruction, or חרם. Due to the presence of חרם objects within their camp, Yahweh tells Joshua, “you will be unable to stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you” (Jos 7:13). This is subsequently accomplished by the death of Achan and his entire family.

Was it really necessary for Achan and his family to die? This research argues that Achan’s sin in Joshua 7 is a source of impurity and contagion, positioning Achan as ‘Sinner Zero.’ In order to achieve military success, the community must rid themselves of both the impurity and the one who introduced the impurity. To make this case, we must first address whether the Achan narrative in Joshua 7 can be studied within the context of the entirety of Joshua. Next, we ask what, if any, parallels other biblical texts can be identified? Then, the task is defining חרם and how it differs from שלל. Finally, we may consider whether חרם is contagious and whether Achan and his property were destroyed to prevent the spread of the contamination.

Reading Joshua 7 as Part of the Joshua Narrative

In what follows, Joshua 7 will be examined within the context of its final form (i.e., along with chapter 6) with the understanding that the narrative of Achan’s sin and subsequent execution in Joshua 7 was intended, at least by the final editors of the book, to be read within the context of the Joshua narrative as a whole. One of the major reasons scholars sometimes read chapter 7 as an independent story will be addressed in due course.

Similarities between חרם in Joshua 6-7 and חרם in Other Biblical Literature

This narrative in Joshua 6-7 is similar to narratives from Judges and 1 Samuel. All three books, along 1 and 2 Kings, are part of what scholars call the Deuteronomistic History, a collection of literature that reflects key theological themes from the book of Deuteronomy. The texts in Tables 1-2, also illustrate that success in battle is predicated on obedience to Yahweh, avoidance of sin, and repentance when sin occurs. These passages help us understand חרם within the context of purity and holiness in warfare.

Joshua	Parallel Verses	Description
6-7	Judg. 2:11-18; 6:1-7:23; 10:6-11:33; 1 Sam. 7:3-11	Sin leads to defeat; removing the sin restores the people before God
6:18	Deut. 7:26; 13:15-17	Warns people to maintain distance from חרם with implications of contamination
7:6	Lev. 21:10; Num. 14:5-6; Judg. 11:34-35; 2 Sam 1:11; 13:30-21; 2 Kgs 2:12; 18:37-19:4	Tearing clothes in distress
7:13-15 7:20	Lev. 27:28-29 1 Sam. 15:23-24; 2 Sam. 12:13; 19:21; 24:17	Privately possessing חרם is sacrilege “I have sinned,” and similar statements observing a formula of self-accusation
10:40; 11:12	Deut. 7:2; 20:17	חרם results from God’s command

What is חרם?

As exemplified in Table 2, the term means to consecrate something or someone as a permanent and definitive offering; in war, to consecrate a city and its inhabitants to destruction; to carry out this destruction; to totally annihilate a population in war; to kill. To be condemned to capital punishment with certain additional conditions; the execution of this punishment. It can also refer to the object or person consecrated or condemned; contaminated by entering into the deadly sphere of the condemned; the act of consecration or of extermination and killing.

The meaning of the term is largely consistent across most of the literature, particularly the fact that once an object becomes חרם, it is set apart for the divine and becomes a danger to the community. The question remains, at what point does an object make that transition from spoil of war to devoted thing?

Book	חרם Verb	חרם Noun
(P) Exodus	22:20	
(P) Leviticus	22:20	
(P) Numbers	21:2; 21:3	18:14
(P) Deuteronomy	2:34; 3:6; 3:6; 7:2; 7:2; 13:16; 20:17; 20:17	7:26; 7:26; 13:18
(Dtr) Joshua	2:10; 6:18; 6:21; 8:26; 10:1; 10:28; 10:35; 10:37; 10:39; 10:40; Achan→ 11:11; 11:12; 11:20; 11:21	6:17; 6:18; 6:18; 6:18; Achan → 7:1; 7:1; 7:11; 7:12; 7:12; 7:13; 7:13; 7:15; 22:20
(Dtr) Judges	1:17; 21:11	
(Dtr) 1 Samuel	Saul→ 15:3; 15:8; 15:9; 15:9; 15:15; 15:18; 15:20	Saul→ 15:21
(Dtr) 1 Kings	9:21; 20:42	
(Dtr) 2 Kings	19:11	
Isaiah	11:15; 34:2; 34:5; 37:11; 43:28	
Jeremiah	25:9; 50:21; 50:26; 51:3	
Ezekiel		44:29
Micah	4:13	
Zechariah		14:11
Malachi		4:6
Daniel	11:44	
Ezra	10:8	
I Chronicles	שלל as Sacrilege→ 4:41	שלל as Sacrilege→ 4:41
II Chronicles	20:23; 32:14	

Table 2: Instances of חרם in the Biblical Text, after Dozeman

Joshua 7:13, 15 (JPS)

Proceed to sanctify the people, and say, ‘Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow; for thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, “There are devoted things among you, O Israel; you will be unable to stand before your enemies until you take away the devoted things from among you.”

¹⁵ And the one who is taken as having the devoted things shall be burned with fire, together with all that he has, for having transgressed the covenant of the Lord, and for having done an outrageous thing in Israel.”

שלל or חרם, What are the Implications?

Two different Hebrew terms are used in Joshua 6-7 to refer to the objects Achan stole from Jericho -- שלל and חרם. Some authors have argued that the use of these two different terms indicates that chapters 6 and 7 were written by different authors at different times. This would mean that scholars could not use material from chapter 6 to help shed light on the understanding of chapter 7, including verses in chapter 6 that clearly describe חרם as contagious (v. 18). In contrast, this research argues that the author could be alternating between these terms intentionally to demonstrate Achan’s character flaws.

In other biblical texts, שלל refers to plunder, whereas חרם refers to devoted things. Both terms are states of being; it is the process of manipulating the items that transition the object from a state of שלל to a state of חרם. In Joshua 7:13, Yahweh tells Joshua that the community must sanctify themselves, using the word חרם to refer to the stolen items. However, when Achan confesses to the theft he does not refer to the theft as חרם; instead, he refers to the items as “spoils” or שלל.

Similarly, in 1 Samuel 15 Yahweh commands Saul to commit חרם. Saul disobeys and keeps the valuable items. Prior to being destroyed, objects cannot be classed fully as חרם; these objects are stuck in a liminal state. Like Achan, Saul uses the term שלל when explaining to the prophet Samuel that the people were the ones who took the objects. Saul then uses חרם when claiming that the objects were taken with the intention of devoting them to Yahweh but after the battle and at a different location, something the reader would know is not allowed (e.g., Deut. 13:16).

This juggling of the terms חרם and שלל in 1 Samuel and Joshua may illustrate a strategic use of these terms to comment on the personalities of the characters. An original audience would likely have known that Achan and Saul were behaving improperly or incompetently. In both cases, the improper handling of חרם has drastic consequences, though in slightly different ways.

Thus, the fact the narratives switches between these terms should not be used as a reason to separate Joshua 6 and 7. Rather, the choice could just as likely have been motivated by literary reasons. Either Achan is a fool who does not understand how חרם works, or he is a liar who downplays the gravity of his offense by referring to the objects as regular spoils of war rather than objects devoted to Yahweh.

Conclusion

Joshua 6 and 7 clearly demonstrate that חרם indicates a state of contagion that can pass from objects to people, as is the case in other discussions of purity and impurity in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. This position is also consistent with descriptions of warfare in other sections of the Deuteronomistic History. Clearly, חרם implies a ritual state capable of causing contamination to the community. Achan, in bringing objects marked as חרם into the camp acted as ‘sinner zero.’ He has transferred the חרם status onto the Israelites, resulting in the Israelites losing the favor of Yahweh and being defeated in the battle of Ai. In destroying Achan, his family, and his property, the community is eliminating the source of the contamination. By the logic of the text, Achan’s death was a necessity to ensure the safety of the community.

Works Cited:

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