



Exploring Joshua 7:1-5 through the lens of social contagion liability



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Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online. Scholars of the Old Testament affirm that the book of Joshua through 2nd Kings is collectively called the deuteronomistic history. The literary unit of Joshua 7:1–5 is one the Locus Classicus of Old Testament. Obedience to God's instruction underscores the theological intentionality expressed in this unified segment of Old Testament literature. This ancient Israelite literary exposition exposes inter-alia the misfortune that besets the entire people of Israel as a result of Achan's moral transgression. The consequence of Achan's antisocial behaviour was so contagious that it spread across to the entire populace of Israel as they were humiliated and defeated in a battle by the warriors of Ai. This pericope has been studied in various perspectives by commentators and scholars of the Old Testament; however, a survey of available literature shows that it has not been explored by scholars from the orbit of social contagion liability. Therefore, this article intends to engage the literary unit, employing the lens of social contagion liability.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This study engaged the literary unit of Joshua 7:1–5 from the orbit of social contagion liability. It argues that Achan's anti-social behaviour spread to the entire populace of Israel and got them contaminated and exposed to misfortune because it has the characteristics of social contagion liability. The study contributed to Old Testament Exegesis, sociology and social contagion study.

Keywords: herem; Achan; social contagion; Joshua 7:1–5; deuteronomistic history; misfortune.

Introduction

The literary composition of Joshua belongs to a class of Old Testament corpus referred to as Deuteronomistic history. Most scholars of the Old Testament affirm that the book of Joshua through 2nd Kings is collectively called the deuteronomistic history because this corpus shares a theological ideology with the book of Deuteronomy (Dozeman 2017:272; Leo Perdue 2001:337). Interestingly, strict adherence to God's instruction (Gottwald 1959:158) underscores the theological intentionality expressed in this unified segment of Old Testament literature. The pericope of Joshua 7:1–5 is one of the Locus Classicus of the Old Testament. This ancient Israelite literary exposition exposes inter-alia the misfortune that engulfs Israel as a result of Achan's violation of God's instruction with regard to the devoted things. Coats (1987:21) explains that the literary unit reports a violation of stipulations for dispensing spoil from the victory of Jericho. The consequence of Achan's 'careless and unthinking infidelity' (Billings 2013:26) was so contagious that it spread across to the entire populace of Israel as they were humiliated and defeated in a battle by the people of Ai.

The text of Joshua 7 has been studied and explained from the perspective of collective responsibility by various commentators and scholars of the Old Testament such as Kaminsky (1995:315–346); Krasovec (1994:68); Hess (1994:89–98); Benson (2023); Clarke (2023); Kretzman (2023). They express the fact that only Achan violated a law on ban yet God punished the whole people of Israel because He sees them as a single entity. However, a survey of available literature shows that the literary unit of Joshua 7:1–5 has not been explored by scholars from the orbit of social contagion liability. Therefore, this article intends to engage this pericope, employing the lens of social contagion liability.

Understanding the concept of social contagion

The phenomenon of social contagion has attracted the attention of researchers and scholars across various disciplines. Angst et al. (2010:1221) explain that the term contagion originated in Biological Sciences and it is used to signify the spread of disease through touch or other forms of close contact among individuals. In the view of Blumer (1951:176) social contagion is an elementary

and spontaneous form of collective responsibility. This thought is similar to a view expressed by Redl (1949) that social contagion is the spread of effect, attitude or behaviour from one person to another or to a group of people. The concept of social contagion has been used to describe various social actions, ranging from social and behavioural to criminal and hysterical (Burgess et al. 2018:164-165). These scholars explicated that in the phenomenon of social contagion literature studies, the emphasis is on the effect of one's action on another or a group. For Levy and Neil (1993:265) social contagion is seen as an involuntary 'catching' of behaviours and attitudes across connected individuals. Benson and Gresham (2007:245) express the fact that the concept of social contagion has received the attention of social sciences researchers as far back as the mid-19th century CE. Explicating further, they opine that a French sociologist and social psychologist Gabriel Tarde and Le Bon helped to popularise the concept as they see it as an unconscious process by which information or beliefs are spread throughout a social group, taking on the form of mass contagion. Tsvetkova and Michael (2015:37) explain that a socially irresponsible act from a member of a group can weaken the protective effects of social norms. An objective survey of this view seems astonishing because it brings to bear that an anti-social behaviour of a member of a group has the capacity or potential to contaminate and weaken the efficacious social immune strength of the group. It is quite impressive to observe that this sociological lens of understanding a phenomenon is employed by the ancient Israelite and gifted literary artist of Joshua 7:1-5. This postulation seems plausible because a single irresponsible and anti-social act of Achan brought misfortune that struck the entire populace of Israel.

An overview of Joshua

Joshua is the first book of the deuteronomistic history. This Israelite historical and religious composition is ranked as one of the Israelites' greatest testimonies to the power and grace of the sovereign Lord of all mankind (Boling 1982:3). Soggin (1989:186) describes the book as 'the first of the former prophets and the first complete book of deuteronomistic history'. He avers that the authorship of Joshua similar to the Pentateuch is difficult to decipher. This scholar argues that apart from the untenable Talmudic attribution, Joshua is anonymous. Goldingay (2016:154) explains that traditionally, Joshua was assumed to be the author of the book. He observes that there is no concrete indicator of the date in the book, but it reads more as a story about him. In his contribution, Langston (1998:4) posits that ancient tradition ascribed Joshua as the author of the book. Crossley (2002:173) admitted that the book in its present form cannot have been written by Joshua. It is really difficult to ascertain the author or the date when Joshua was written because this was not mentioned in the narrative. However, it is quite probable, that Joshua was composed during the exilic period to instructively warn the people of Israel that violation of God's instruction attracts severe punishment. Speaking in this line of thought Noth (1981); Maxwell and Hayes (1981); Dozeman (2015:5) write that the composition date of Joshua is in the exilic era. In his own contribution, Goldingay (2016:154) writes that 'the book of Joshua is a telescoping of the Israelite conquest into a single movement'. An objective reading of Joshua exposes that the narrative is highly exaggerated. In fact, Israel's victory against their enemies is not an account of conquest, in which they subdued the indigenous occupants and take their cities (Dozeman 2015:28); it is more or less a donation from God to them rather than through their military prowess. It has been said that the theology of the book underscores a fascinating aphorism that 'the numeric strength of Israelite combatants has nothing to do with their victories' (Boling 1982:29; Soggin 1989:194). Rowlett (1996:13) comments that 'Joshua contains numerous examples of willing compliance and even enthusiastic identification with the leader in whom the power is concentrated'. A critical reading of Joshua's sending of spies to scout the land when God has earlier told him that 'no man shall be able to stand before him' arguably entails the fact that the promises of God do not negate human responsibility (Hamilton 2004:22). The book of Joshua in terms of theme completes Genesis through Deuteronomy and tells of the last stage in the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. Viewed in this perspective, Hamilton explains that Genesis through Joshua can be seen as a Hexateuch.

The Hebrew Text of Joshua 7:1-51 Researchers' translation of Joshua 7:1-5

וימעלו בני־ישראל מעל בחרם ויקח עבן בּן־כּרמי בֶּן־זַבְדִּי בֶּן־זֶבח לְמַשֵּה יְהוּדָה מִן־הַחֵבׁר וַיְחַר־אַף יָהְוָה בִּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

(v. 1)

וַיִּשָׁלַח יָהוֹשֶׁעַ אַנָשִׁים מִירִיחוֹ הָעִַّי אַשֶּׁר עִם־בֵּית אָנֶן מֶקֶדֶם לְבֵית־אֵׁל וַיְּאמֶר אֲלֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר עֲלָוּ וְרַגְּלָוּ :אֶת־הָאֶרֶץ וַיִּצְלוּ הָאַנָשִׁים וַיְרַגְּלָוּ אֶת־הָעָי

וַיָּשָׁבוּ אֶל־יְהוֹשַׁׁעַ וַיֹּאמְרָוּ אֵלֶיוֹ אַל־יַנְעַל כָּל־הָעָמֹ ּרְאַלְשָׁת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ אַוֹ כִּשְׁלְשֶׁת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ יַעֲלוּ וְיַכְּוּ אָת־הָצֶי אַל־ תְּיַגַּע־שָׁמָהֹ אֶת־כָּל־הָעָׁם כִּי מְעַט הַמָּה:

וַיַּצְלָוּ מִן־הָעָםֹ שָׁמָה כִּשְׁלְשֶׁת אֲלָפִים אֵישׁ וַיָּנֵסוּ לְפְנֵי אַנְעֵי הָעֶי:

(v. 4)

וַיַּכּוּ מֵּטָׁם אַנְשֵׁי הָעַּׁי כִּשְׁלֹשִים וְשִׁשָּׁה אִישׁ וַיִּרְדְּפֿוּם לְפָגֵי הַשַּׁעַר עַד־הַשְּׁבָרִים וַיַּכָּוּם בַּמּנֹרֶד וַיִּמַס לְבַב־ הָצָם וַיְהָי לְמָיִם:

- 1. But the sons of Israel were unfaithful with regard to the devoted things. And Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah belonging to a tribe of Judah took from the devoted things and the anger of the LORD enveloped at the sons of Israel.
- And Joshua sent out men from Jericho to Ai which is in Beth-Aven from east towards Bethel. And he said to them, go up and spy the land. And the men went up and spied the Ai.
- And they returned to Joshua and said to him. Do not make all the people go up; like two or 3000 men should go up and smite the Ai. Do not make weary all the people for they are few
- And the people went up from there like 3000 men but they fled before the men of Ai.
- 5. And the men of Ai smote like thirty-six men and pursued them before the gate as far as the Shebarim and smote them in the slope. And the hearts of the people melted and turned to waters.

Literary context of Joshua 7:1-5

The text of Joshua 7:1–5 brings into focus the humiliating assault that enveloped the Israelites from the warriors of Ai. A cursory reading of the text exhibits that the immediate literary context that generated the exposition of Joshua 7:1-5 is encased in chapter 6:17-19. It is in this segment of Joshua that the heroic personage of the study text and leader of the Israelite assembly explicates to the people that the city of Jericho and all that is in it should be devoted to the LORD for destruction (Ellis 1963:171). However, a reading of Joshua's corpus underscores the fact that this instruction

1.The Hebrew text used here is from Schenker, A., (1997).

was violated by Achan. The consequence of this was so contagious that it affected all the populace of Israel. Therefore, the literary unit of Joshua 7:1–5 interfaces with 6:17–19. This articulation seems valid and plausible because the anti-social behaviour of Achan berefts the Israelites of God's protective immunity with which to fight and conquer their enemies (the people of Ai).

Structure of Joshua 7:1–5

The literary unit of Joshua 7:1–5 could be segmented into three parts. The first division of this pericope (v. 1) discloses to the reader the sin which the people of Israel committed against God during their destruction of Jericho. The narrator expresses that Israel broke faith in God in regard to the devoted things. A cursory look at this unit shows that it is only one man, Achan, from the tribe of Judah who sinned but God counted it as sin by the entire populace. Consequently, he let loose his anger against the whole people of Israel.

The second part of the text covers (vv. 2–3). This unit communicates to the audience that the leader of the group of Israel sent spies from Jericho to Ai in order to spy on the land. Responding to the leader's instruction, the men went out and inspected the land as directed by Joshua. They came back with an enthralling report. They explained that the inhabitants of the city were so few. It is on the basis of this fact that they advised Joshua not to engage all the men in the battle against Ai. They suggested that only 2000 or 3000 men should go up and attack Ai. In addition, the last segment of the text speaks that about 3000 men went up and attacked the people of Ai. However, they were humiliated as they fled before the people of Ai who killed about 36 of them and gave them a hot chase in the slope out of their city gate. This defeat melted the hearts of the people.

Close reading of Joshua 7:1-5 through the lens of social contagion liability

The introductory segment of the pericope (v. 1) exposes the fact that the sons of Israel broke their faith in God. An analysis of the Hebrew construct וַיִּמְעֵּלְוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל identifies the fact that the Israelites are being referred to as those who acted unfaithfully in regard to the accursed things. Adeyemo (2006:274) postulates that Achan's sin of violating the command not to touch or tamper with the loot of Jericho affected the entire congregation of Israel. Achan's sin brought severe punishment on the populace of Israel for the LORD's anger burned against them as they were humiliated by the soldiers of Ai in the battle who killed some of them and chased them out of their city. This arguably underscores the ideology of social contagion liability that differs significantly from the concept of collective responsibility. Put differently, the destruction of Achan and members of his household could be explained from the standpoint of collective responsibility. Woudstra (1981) says it is quite probable that:

Achan's family might have known about the stolen items which their father kept in the house but kept mute and did not report him to Joshua. So, they are culpable for the misfortune that enveloped them. (n.p.)

In collective responsibility, the members of one's household can be punished for the sin of their father but this should not spread and contaminate the entire community. A close survey of Exodus 20:5–6 lends credence to this view:

I the LORD your God, am jealous God inflicting punishment for their fathers' wickedness on the children of those who hate me down to the third and fourth generation; but bestowing mercy on the children of those who love me and keep my commandments.

This article, therefore, expostulates the fact that the calamity that enveloped the sons of Israel because of Achan's sin of violating the law on ban should not be understood and interpreted as a collective responsibility. Rather, it should be explained from the lens of social contagion liability. This dialectic is anchored on the fact that in the social contagion liability theory, the presence of a guilty person has the capacity to contaminate the whole populace. This interestingly is the case of the sons of Israel who suffer the guilt of Achan's tampering with the accursed things הַּחֶּׁרֶם. This misfortune experienced by the sons of Israel could also be viewed from the stand point of the priestly concept of impurity in which the presence of a defiled person makes it impossible for God to dwell in the midst of his people until the correct rituals are performed. Speaking in this line of thought, Meyer (2018:85) explains that a presence of herem pushes YHWH away from the camp of his people. A glance at the priestly source of Numbers 5:1-10 underscores this claim as YHWH charges Moses to remove any defiled person; male and female alike who is suffering from leprosy; discharge or has touched a corpse and put them outside the camp so that they will not defile the camp where he resides in their midst (Feder 2013:163). There is a possibility of restitution in Number 5. But this is not the case in Joshua 7, where the entire populace of Israel is punished for the misdeed of Achan in order to purify the camp. The Hebrew word הַּהֵּבֶּם could be explained as things that are dedicated exclusively to profane use, to be destroyed completely or to be set apart solely for cultic use (Holladay 1988:117). De Prenter (2012) and Stern (1991:225) maintain that the word הַּהֶּׁרֶם is a taboo concept and comprises things that are forbidden. Butler (2014:384) describes the concept of herem in Joshua as a test of obedience. Dozeman (2015:56–57) argues that לֵּכֶם does not have the power to contaminate rather its power to contaminate lies with the desires of the people and not with the object. Dozeman's view is no doubt interesting and apt. His thought tacitly underscores the fact that it is the people who invest הֵּרֶם with its efficacious ability to contaminate. Disagreeing with Dozeman's position, Meyer (2018:84) posits that herem has the capacity to contaminate. His thought seems valid because a close survey of הַּלֶּכִם in Joshua 7 shows that it is YHWH who punished the people of Israel for Achan's antisocial behaviour. Consequently, God refers to בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל [the sons of Israel] as those who

broke faith with Him as a result of 'divine prohibition' (Butler 2014:400). This connotes the idea of social contagion liability. Hence, the entire people of Israel were adjudged culpable by God because of Achan's moral transgression. A social contagion reading of the pericope has disclosed that the reason why God let loose his אָך anger on the sons of Israel was because Achan's sin of misappropriation of the spoils of Jericho has spread to the whole people of Israel and polluted them. It could be argued that in the social contagion liability studies, the emphasis lies on the effect of one's action on another or group. This, in other words, is explained as a network of coerced catching of behaviours involving connected individuals. This rationalism seems astonishing and holds promise for an interpretation of Joshua 7:1-5. Viewed in this line of thought, it unravels the reason why a single anti-social act of Achan was transmitted involuntarily to the entire people of Israel who are not members of his household. It is obvious that only Achan violated the instruction on the ban (Barnes 2023:1; Clarke 2023:1; Greenberg 1960:24; Hale 2007:445; Jackson 1972:164; Krasovec 1984:67-68; Kretzman 2023:1) yet God judged all the sons of Israel to be culpable as Achan's misdeed arguably had contaminated the entire populace and thus exposed them to danger.

In this unit (vv. 2–3), Joshua commanded the אַנְשָׁי men of Israel at Beth-aven to go up and scout the land. May (1962:295) explains that the meaning of the word Beth-aven is the house of wickedness. He maintains that the names Bethel and Bethaven refer to the same town. It should be observed here that it is not mentioned in the text if Joshua consulted God before sending his men to spy on Ai. Using the Hebrew utterance יַּיְצֶיֹּי מָרִיבְּיִלְי אָחִיהְעָיִי [and the men went up and spied the land], the narrator implicitly conveys the message to the reader that Joshua is a respected military commander whose command is followed by the men of Israel. Guzil (2022:1) affirms that Joshua is a wise military commander. His intelligent military personnel brought back reports to him in verse 3 and expressed thus; אַרִייַעֵּל כָּלִי־תָּעָל (do not make all the people go up). According to Okwueze (2013):

[*T*]he spies brought back a report which indicated that the people of Ai were few and lacking in any strength that could challenge the military might of Israel and therefore suggested that just a few men, not all the people should go for the battle. (p. 84)

The last part of the literary unit of Joshua 7:1–5 (vv. 4–5) informs the reader that about 3000 men went up and attacked Ai but they were routed by the warriors of Ai. The men of Ai smote או about 36 men of the people of Israel and chased them out of their city gate and killed them in the slope.

This harassing assault by the people of Ai melted the hearts of the people of Israel לְבַב־הָּעֶם וַיְהֵי לְמֵים. Hale (2007:445) describes this as 'a humiliating defeat'. It is quite disheartening that the sons of Israel suffer a humiliating defeat from the soldiers of Ai as a result of Achan's anti-social behaviour, which had spread across like a contagious disease and made them vulnerable to misfortune. Commenting on this misfortune that engulfs the men of Israel, Kohlenberger (1989:17) writes that Israel's heart melted with fear. Benson (2023:1) explains that Israel's defeat by the armies of Ai got their 'hearts melted, and became as water soft and weak, and full of fluctuation and trembling'. The literary technique of hyperbole that is underscored in a literary construct when a writer expresses a fact in an exaggerated manner is found in this last segment of the pericope. It is true that the men of Israel were defeated in the battle by the soldiers of Ai but to state that their hearts got melted and turned to waters is unarguably an overstatement.

Conclusion

Joshua 7 is one of the notable passages in the Bible. This study engages the pericope of Joshua 7:1-5 through the lens of social contagion liability. This literary unit is an exposition of the misfortune that engulfed the entire people of Israel as a result of Achan's anti-social behaviour. Commentators and scholars of the Old Testament have written extensively on this ancient Israelite literary construct. However, a survey of the available literature has shown that this pericope has not been explored by scholars in the orbit of social contagion liability. An objective reading of the pericope has disclosed that Achan's anti-social behaviour has a characteristic of social contagion liability. The effect of his transgression was so contagious that it spread involuntarily to the whole congregation of Israel and got them contaminated and bereft of God's protective immunity. Consequently, they were humiliated in a battle by the warriors of Ai who killed about 36 men of Israel and chased them out of their city gate.

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 $\ensuremath{\text{D.O.O.}}$ and $\ensuremath{\text{D.J.H.}}$ contributed equally in writing this research article.

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