



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



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Dates:

Received: 31 May 2024

Accepted: 01 Aug. 2024

Published: 12 Sept. 2024

How to cite this article:

Odo, D.O. & Human, D.J., 2024, 'Exploring Joshua 7:1–5 through the lens of social contagion liability', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 45(1), a3197. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v45i1.3197>

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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

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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 *בְּנֵי־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 *הַתְּרָם*. 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 *הַתְּרָם* 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 *הַתְּרָם* 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 *תְּרָם* 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 *תְּרָם* 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 *תְּרָם* in Joshua 7 shows that it is YHWH who punished the people of Israel for Achan's antisocial behaviour. Consequently, God refers to *בְּנֵי־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 אָר 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 אֲנָשֵׁי 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 $\text{וַיַּעֲלוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיִּרְגְּלוּ אֶת-הָאֵרֶץ}$ [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; $\text{אַל-יַעַל כָּל-הָעָם}$ [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)

There is a discovery of Jussive in the above Hebrew construct. Lambdin (2010:118) explains that the third person indirect imperative forms, singular and plural so used are called Jussive. An analysis of Hebrew words $\text{אַל-יַעַל כָּל-הָעָם אֵישׁ אֶחָדָם}$ [do not make all the people go up] discloses that the word אַל-יַעַל is in Jussive form. It is obvious that Joshua adhered to the indirect imperative of his military personnel as he took only few soldiers to fight the warriors of Ai.

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 וַיַּכּוּ 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 $\text{לִבְהִתְעָם וַיִּהְיֶה לְמַיִם}$. 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.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

D.O.O. and D.J.H. contributed equally in writing this research article.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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