

21. Defining a Function of Patriarchy (Joshua 1–8, 23–24)

The example of Achan the son of Carmi in Joshua 7 teaches two important lessons: (1) that under the terms of the Sinai Covenant one man may lose God’s protection of the entire covenant people of God by his personal transgression; and (2) that by compromising his role as head of his family he may additionally forfeit his family’s divine protection. This again affirms the true basis of patriarchy in Israel—that the man’s role isn’t only that of provider of his family but also of protector, their welfare hinging on whether he keeps the terms of God’s covenant. His role within the family, in effect, replicates the role of kings under the terms of the Davidic Covenant in which a king serves as a proxy savior of his people.

In the story of Achan the son of Carmi, Joshua sends three thousand men of Israel to capture the city of Ai. As Ai is a smaller city, they assume it won’t be difficult so they send less men: “There went up thither of the people about three thousand men: and they fled before the men of Ai. And the men of Ai smote of them about thirty and six men: for they chased them from before the gate even unto Shebarim, and smote them in the going down: wherefore the hearts of the people melted, and became as water. And Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until the eventide, he and the elders of Israel, and put dust upon their heads. And Joshua said, Alas, O Lord God, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us?” (Joshua 7:4–7).

Whereas in all their battles up to this point Israel’s armies have been successful in smiting the corrupt Amorites/Canaanites, in this instance they suffer a serious loss. The Lord answers Joshua’s inquiry by saying “Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you anymore, except ye destroy the accursed from among you” (Joshua 7:11–12). Instead of the people of Israel taking the spoils of war for themselves, they had been commanded to consecrate them to the Lord (Numbers 31:48–54). So when one man reneges on his commitment and conceals the spoils in his tent, Israel’s army suffers losses.

Joshua’s response is swift as he casts lots over Israel’s tribes: “Joshua rose up early in the morning, and brought Israel by their tribes; and the tribe of Judah was taken: And he brought the family of Judah; and he took the family of the Zarhites: and he brought the family of the Zarhites man by man; and Zabdi was taken: And he brought his household man by man; and Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken. And Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou hast done; hide it not from me. And Achan answered Joshua, and said, Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done: When I saw among the spoils a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it” (Joshua 7:16–21).

In the act of removing “the accursed thing” from among them as God had required (Joshua 7:12–13), the people stone to death and burn the perpetrator, Achan the son of Carmi and his whole household because through his covetousness he had compromised the lives of the entire nation: “And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had: and they brought them unto the Valley of Achor. And Joshua said, Why hast thou troubled us? the Lord shall trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones unto this day. So the Lord turned from the fierceness of his anger. Wherefore the name of that place was called, the Valley of Achor, unto this day” (Joshua 7:24–26).

After Israel executed the offender and his family, God restored his protection and Israel was again victorious in battle. As additional such incidents show, the fact that under a national or *collective* covenant one man can endanger an entire people has to be taken seriously. The same way that a blessed posterity constitutes a chief benefit of keeping the terms of God’s covenant, so a cursed posterity—as with that of Achan the son of Carmi—constitutes its opposite. By his transgression, a man can lose God’s protection of those within his stewardship. And yet, many people who don’t understand the gravity of these covenantal considerations perceive Jehovah in the Old Testament to be a vindictive God. The truth is that he is still the same God of justice to this day, something we should keep in mind when we have need to repent.