

COVETOUSNESS TROUBLES ISRAEL

Summary and Historical Background

One of the most unsettling events of Israel's conquest of Canaan was defeat at Ai (Josh 7). Up to that time, Israel's progress under Joshua had been strong. The crossing of the Jordan and the battle of Jericho demonstrated God's powerful presence with Israel. Then God suddenly withdrew his favor, and Israel suffered under Joshua's command. Joshua naturally asked, "Why?" God's answer to that question is valuable to present-day Christians because it reveals His ways of righteousness.

One man in Israel had committed a deliberate, treacherous, secret sin. That man was Achan. His sin had to be judged and eliminated before Israel could conquer again. Three facts stand out in the judgment of that sin. First, Achan's sin, though hid from the thousands of Israel, was not hid from God. His sin, though secret, was certain to be uncovered (Num 32:23). Second, Joshua had no personal hatred for Achan. His sin was against God and affected all Israel. Third, judgment of his sin was severe. Achan not only lost his ungodly gains, but also his family and his own life.

God's grace to Israel was revealed once again, as sin was judged (Josh 8). He restored Israel to the same standing they had enjoyed before and He gave them the plans for victory over Ai. God even used Israel's initial failure in the new battle plan that He gave to Joshua so that Ai's soldiers were successfully ambushed. Furthermore, Israel was permitted to keep the spoils of the battle for themselves. Israel followed God's plan exactly and gained the victory over Ai.

Following the victory over Ai, Israel went north to Mount Ebal to renew their covenant with God. Israel was reminded that their conquest of Canaan was dependent on their right relationship with God. As soon as Israel conquered Ai, they obeyed God's instructions through Moses (Deut 27) and renewed their covenant with God. This renewal reminded Israel that their possession of the promised land depended on their obedience to the Mosaic covenant.

I. Defeat at Ai: Cost of Sin — 7:1-9

A. The Cause of Defeat — 7:1

7:1 — The cause of defeat at Ai was sin. Achan took of the accursed things at Jericho, the things that were to be wholly given to God. These things were to be given to God to enhance His service or they were to be given to God so they could be destroyed and not stand in the way of His service. Achan's sin did not affect him alone, but all of Israel. Two reasons are suggested for this widespread effect. (1) The sin Achan had committed in act had also been committed by many Israelites in their hearts. They did not do as Achan did, but they wanted to do it. (2) The sin of Achan was considered as a principle of solidarity. Solidarity regards all men as part of a community. The sin of Achan took purity from the nation which it needed in order to be blessed by God. Paul writes similarly in 1 Cor 12:26, "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it." Men should avoid sinning, not only to escape the consequences to themselves personally, but also to their families, to their communities, to their places of work, and to their nations.

Achan "committed a trespass." Two ideas stand out in this sin: secrecy and treachery. The verb literally means "to act under cover." Achan certainly took steps to be sure he would not be discovered (7:22). Treachery is seen in the fact that "to commit a trespass" almost always refers to the violation of a covenant. Numbers 5:12, 27 refer to a woman violating her marriage covenant. In thirty of the thirty-five places where this verb is used, it refers to a violation of Jehovah's rights under the Covenant.

B. The Concreteness of Defeat — 7:2-5

7:2-3 — Joshua sent a spying mission to Ai from Jericho. The location of Ai has not been determined archaeologically. The most common suggested place (a hill called Et-Tell) does

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not seem to be Ai, since this site appears to have been abandoned from 2000 to 1100 B.C. Further excavation will probably discover the actual site of Ai at 1400 B.C.

At least two spiritual problems are seen in Joshua's first attack on Ai. One is that he acted before he received any instruction from God. In every other case God appeared to Joshua before the battle was fought (Josh 5:13-6:5 at Jericho; 8:1-2 at Ai, 10:8 before Gibeon; 11:6 at Merom). The military expedition was sent out in presumption. The other problem is over-confidence. Joshua only sent about three thousand troops against Ai, a fortified city that also had about the same number of troops within its walls (a population of twelve thousand would have about one fighting man to every four or five persons). Maybe Joshua thought he was acting in faith, and it would have been faith, if God had so instructed him; but without God's instruction, it was over-confidence.

7:4-5 — The result was defeat. Thirty-six men of Israel died. The armed men of Israel were routed, and the hearts of the people melted. In 5:1 the hearts of the enemy melted, but now the hearts of Israel's people melted. It was a complete change.

C. The Complaint of Defeat — 7:6-9

7:6 — Joshua was shocked and went into mourning. The rending of his garments and the throwing of dust on his head were common oriental expressions of mourning.

7:7-9 — Joshua's plaintive prayer is difficult to explain. There are two expressions which could imply self-reproach: "Would to God we had been content," and "O Lord, what shall I say," which implies "Let guilt be on me, if I speak wrongfully." Joshua asked for the vindication of God's name.

However, these words are similar to Israel's complaints in the wilderness (Num 14:3). It seems that Joshua almost casts the blame of Israel's defeat on God. The language he used does not seem to be an expression of faith, but rather of doubt.

II. Death of Achan: Cleansing for Sin — 7:10-26

A. Instruction for Joshua — 7:10-15

7:10-12 — The Lord rebuked Joshua for his prayer. Action, not supplication, was needed. The cause for defeat was not in Jehovah, but sin in Israel. Israel's sin was a violation of the covenant. The violation of the covenant was chiefly taking of the accursed thing, and this sin had bred a disreputable progeny: theft, lying, selfishness. "To put among their own stuff" is the same as saying, "They took it for themselves and kept it from God."

The result was defeat. When Achan took of the accursed thing, Israel became accursed. By taking the world's things, Israel became a part of the world and was subject to the destruction of the world. Israel had to destroy the accursed thing before God could be with them and bless them.

7:13-15 — God told Joshua how to remove His wrath. First, there was to be instruction. Joshua had to tell Israel what offended God so they could sanctify themselves. Second, Joshua had to initiate an investigation of Israel in cooperation with the Lord. He would designate the offender by means of the lot. Third, it was necessary that an infliction be imposed on the offender. The sinner was to be destroyed with fire. This sin was "folly," because it produced a tragedy rather than a triumph.

B. Investigation of Israel — 7:16-23

7:16-18 — The process of investigation was very simple. One man from each tribe was represented before Joshua, and the Lord directed Joshua by means of the lot to select the tribe that had the offender. Judah was chosen. Then the clans (KJV, "families") of Judah presented their representative before Joshua and the lot fell upon the clan of Zerah. Then the representatives of

the households of Zerah came forward, and the lot fell upon Zabdi. Finally, the men of Zabdi came forward, and the lot fell on Achan. Through this lengthy process, Achan had adequate time to voluntarily surrender himself, but he kept silent until it was too late for mercy.

7:19 — Joshua's address of Achan was remarkable. Instead of speaking to him roughly or harshly, he addressed him as "my son." Joshua was kind, yet firm as he administered his duty as a judge. Furthermore, he dealt with Achan spiritually by exhorting him, "Give glory to God and make confession to Him." The word, "confession," can be rendered, "praise." Achan's confession would restore praise to God by showing that He was not at fault in the failure of Israel at Ai.

7:20, 21 — Achan confessed his sin. He described the process by which he was drawn into sin: "I saw...I coveted...I took." this was a process also seen in Eve's sin (Gen 3:5, 6). Such a contrite confession was in marked contrast to that of Israel's neighbors. To the Egyptians sin was only a disharmony with the cosmic order - a lack of knowledge - not a revolt against God's will.

The word for "garment" is the same word as the king's robe in Jonah 3:6.

A "shekel" is about equal to 2/5 of an ounce. Two hundred shekels of silver would make about five pounds and wedge of gold of fifty shekels would make about 1 1/4 pounds.

7:22-23 — An investigation was made and the truth of Achan's confession was verified.

C. Infliction of Achan — 7:24-26

7:24 — Achan and his family (his family certainly knew about the theft) were taken to the valley of Achor, which means "trouble."

7:25-26 — Joshua pronounced the judgment. Since Achan's sin had troubled Israel, now his sin would trouble him. Achan and his family were stoned to death by all Israel as an expression of their abhorrence of his sin. Then their bodies were burned and a mound of stones was raised over their corpses to remind Israel of the dreadful penalty of sin.

It is not certain where Achan's eternal abode is. His full and frank confession suggests that he might have truly repented, but such answers are better left with God.

III. Destruction of Ai: Conquest by Faith — 8:1-29

A. Preparation to Attack — 8:1-13

8:1-2 — Since Israel's sin had been removed, God once again could empower Israel. They no longer needed to be afraid of the enemy (1:6, 9; Deut 31:8). Furthermore, Israel's fellowship with God was restored and He gave them specific instructions for victory. (1) All of Israel's army was to attack Ai, not just a small contingent. (2) Israel was to use an ambush to conquer Ai. An ambush is not inconsistent with God's veracity. An ambush simply does not give the enemy all the information as to how one plans to make his attack. However, a breach of faith in a treaty or covenant is not allowable in warfare.

God's instructions concerning the booty at Ai were different than at Jericho. Israel could keep the goods and cattle since God had already received the first fruits of the conquest at Jericho. However, all the people at Ai were to be killed, just as was done at Jericho.

8:3-13 — The plan of ambush was very simple in essence. The main army of Israel was to march as if they were attacking Ai frontally. When Ai's troops would come out to fight, Israel would feign a rout, drawing Ai's men far away from the city. Then at Joshua's signal, 30,000 troops would come out of hiding to take the city and set it on fire. Then both divisions of Israel would attack Ai's troops from opposite directions until all were destroyed. There is a problem, however. How many ambushes were there? One view believes that there was one ambush, lying to the southwest of the city. Such a view demands a scribal mistake in the transmission of the two numbers (30,000 and 5,000).

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The second view has two ambushes. Thirty thousand men were southwest of Ai, with 5,000 men northwest of Ai, between Bethel and Ai. The 5,000 men would be a covering force to fight the men of Bethel that would try to help Ai. This view explains the addition of the men of Bethel to the list of casualties from this conflict (8:17).

B. Prosecution of the Attack — 8:14-29

8:14-17 — The king of Ai rose to the bait. He attacked Israel. When Israel "fled," he called on all his reserves to rout Israel and drive them back to the plains of Jordan.

8:18-22 — God told Joshua when it was time for the ambush to attack. Joshua stretched forth his spear. The ambush struck, Israel counter-attacked, and every man of Ai was killed.

8:24-26 — Israel again returned to kill all the other inhabitants of Ai. The number, 12,000, probably includes the people who lived outside of the city, but who were ruled by Ai. Joshua caused Ai to be burned.

8:27-28 — Israel was obedient to God. They utterly destroyed all the people and took the spoils for themselves.

8:29 — The king of Ai was made a special example. He was executed, then hung on a tree to expose him. But even his body was subject to the law of Deuteronomy 21:22-23. At sunset his body was taken down and buried under a heap of stones in the ruins of Ai.

IV. Dedication at Mt. Ebal: Covenant Renewal with God — 8:30-35

8:30-31 — After this victory Israel took a "time out" from their conquest of Canaan and went to Mt. Ebal for a covenant renewal ceremony. This ceremony was commanded in Deuteronomy 27:1-26. This ceremony was a reminder to Israel that their war in Canaan was not only a military conflict, but also a spiritual conflict. The ceremony made no military sense, but since it was done in obedience to God's command, it made good spiritual sense.

The first part of this ceremony was the building of an altar. The altar was built in accordance with the instructions of Exodus 20:24-26, again showing Israel's obedience to the law. Two types of offerings were made: burnt offerings, expressing dedication to God, and peace offerings, expressing fellowship with God. These two types of offerings were also made when the law was given to Israel (Ex 20:24).

8:32 — Joshua then wrote on stones the Law of Moses. How much was written is uncertain. Several interpretations are raised.

(1) The Ten Commandments only.

(2) The blessings and cursings of Deuteronomy 28.

(3) The whole of the book of Deuteronomy.

(4) The whole Pentateuch.

(5) The whole Pentateuch in seventy languages so that all men might read it (!!). Though this last interpretation is impossible, it rightly suggests the universality of the law.

8:33-35 — Israel now gathered on Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerazim to recite the blessings and cursings of Deuteronomy 28. Mount Ebal and Mt. Gerazim are located next to each other and are 3080 feet and 2849 feet high respectively. They form a natural amphitheater. All of Israel took part and affirmed the Mosaic covenant with God. God's requirements were made known to all as they settled in Canaan. When His requirements are met, God's blessing is assured.