

## Joshua

### Joshua 7-9: The Case of Achan

After the fall of Jericho, the theme of obedience continues when the character Achan breaks one of YHWH's rules. This story illustrates how important it was to follow God's instructions *exactly*. According to Deuteronomy, absolutely everything and everyone must be destroyed after a city has been defeated in battle (recall last week's discussion of *herem*). Yet Achan disobeys this law and secretly takes some of the city's treasure for himself instead. As a result, Israel fails to overtake the small city of Ai (meaning "heap of ruins"), even after their impressive victory in Jericho.

### Crime and Punishment

After Achan's transgression is discovered, we're told that both he and his entire family are stoned to death. The utterly destructive nature of this punishment mirrors the concept of *herem* on a smaller scale. Because Achan failed to fulfill the *herem*, he and his family now suffer destruction themselves to the fullest extent. It is important to note that individual rights did not bear a strong significance in the ancient world. Holding Achan's family accountable for his crime was considered fair. Individuals often stood in for collectives during this time and if one person broke the law, it was understood that *all* of the people would suffer as a result. The Israelites were therefore unwilling to risk sparing Achan's family because, in their eyes, the welfare of their entire community was at stake.

### With God on Their Side

Once Achan's disobedience had been rooted out, Israel experienced no trouble in capturing Ai. Although they continue to encounter the same lack of equipment and inability to defend themselves at every step along their journey, their success rate changes once they are all fully aligned in obedience to YHWH. The repetition of this pattern, in which disobedience leads to failure and obedience leads to victory, affirms the storyteller's point: all of Israel's power comes from God and they are completely powerless on their own.

### The Origins of Ancient Israel

Although there are many theories about the historical origins of Israel, a particularly influential study published by Norman Gottwald in 1979 argued that Israel historically began as an indigenous peasant uprising. Gottwald's theory draws largely on evidence from the Amarna Letters, which were written during the mid-second millennium BCE. The letters indicate that there were rebellious people in the area of Egypt and Canaan who were sometimes called *Habiru* (meaning "outsider"), which sounds vaguely similar to "Hebrew."

The general scholarly consensus today is that the Israelites likely left Canaanite cities to form their own community in the highlands. While there is evidence for an undercurrent of disaffected, non-city-dwelling, semi-nomadic mercenary-types who floated around the margins of society in the ancient world, Israel's formation was probably not quite so intentional or immediate as a unified uprising. When Israel became strong enough, they eventually returned and violently conquered some of those cities, so it seems they were not so committed to social justice after all (or perhaps at least not for people other than themselves).

#### Interpreting The Past In Light of Our Present

Gottwald's theory that the Israelites rose up together and took down their capitalist oppressors may be more a reflection of his own historical location than it is of the Israelites'. Because Gottwald was writing during the Vietnam war period in the United States, he undoubtedly interpreted and re-imagined the scope of human history (Israel's history, specifically) through that lens.

Although Gottwald's theory is no longer dominant in biblical scholarship, his work provides a useful reminder that people in the ancient world shared many of the same struggles people experience in the modern world. Recognizing this fact can help us read and understand the text in a new light. There were economic issues in the ancient world. People then experienced poverty, oppression, uprisings and unrest, just as there are in our own communities today, and just as there have been at every other time throughout all of recorded human history.

#### Miracles and Hyperbole

So is there archaeological evidence that the sun stood still over Gibeon? Most people can probably guess the answer (no). Stories such as this one in Joshua 10 could be read as clues in the biblical text that it shouldn't — or perhaps even isn't *meant to* — be taken literally. It is important to remember the desire to find proof of the historicity of events described in these texts is a relatively modern development. In the context of the book of Joshua, the storyteller is more interested in what these stories mean than their factuality. Ultimately, the Deuteronomic Historian's point is that all of Israel's history (both successes and failures) are part of a divinely ordained story. Everything in this text is intended to prove their underlying ideological message that the success of conquest was a result of obedience to God