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Joshua 6:15-21: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of the Herem

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In the Old Testament, there are a number of books that contain violent stories that may shock the casual reader. Some of these stories seem to encourage not only the slaughtering of enemy armies, but also the murder of innocent civilians. The book of Joshua, in particular, contains a number of such tales. In chapters six through eleven of this book, God instructs Joshua and his followers to obliterate dozens of enemy armies, and subsequently orders them to lay their towns to waste. Joshua and his followers put to death men, women, children, and livestock by the "edge of the sword." Biblical scholars refer to this process of systematic destruction, in which all those who oppose the Lord are laid to waste, as the *herem*. Many readers find this concept to be highly disturbing; some feel it runs counter to Christian and Jewish beliefs. They question why the loving and merciful Lord would command his followers to carry out these gruesome acts."

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Joshua 6:15-21: Exploring the Deeper Meaning of the Herem

By: Mike Wegman

Introduction

In the Old Testament, there are a number of books that contain violent stories that may shock the casual reader. Some of these stories seem to encourage not only the slaughtering of enemy armies, but also the murder of innocent civilians. The book of Joshua, in particular, contains a number of such tales. In chapters six through eleven of this book, God instructs Joshua and his followers to obliterate dozens of enemy armies, and subsequently orders them to lay their towns to waste. Joshua and his followers put to death men, women, children, and livestock by the “edge of the sword.” Biblical scholars refer to this process of systematic destruction, in which all those who oppose the Lord are laid to waste, as the *herem*. Many readers find this concept to be highly disturbing; some feel it runs counter to Christian and Jewish beliefs. They question why the loving and merciful Lord would command his followers to carry out these gruesome acts.

However, an in-depth analysis of Joshua 6:15-21, which narrates the battle of Jericho, reveals that the Lord’s command of the *herem* – while certainly harsh and cruel – serves an important purpose: God wants to establish that his people *must* follow his rules in order to be victorious and spiritually pure. God is therefore acting as a type of paternalistic warrior by commanding the *herem*. Aware of the fact that Israel’s survival hinged on their obedience and loyalty to him, the Lord ordered the *herem* to serve the

purposes of delivering military victory and ensuring his followers obeyed his laws by eliminating the threat of their being tainted by Canaanite religions.

Through an examination of the book of Joshua's historical context, its relationship to other books in the bible, and a verse-by-verse analysis of Joshua 6:15-21, I will discuss the deeper meaning of the *herem* in the Old Testament, showing that it is not meant to condone or encourage gratuitous violence but to ensure that Israel stayed spiritually pure and faithful to God. I will also discuss the application of the book of Joshua to today's readers.

Historical Context

The book's authorship and date of compilation have long been a point of contention among scholars. The only thing known about the author for certain is that it was not Joshua himself (Woudstra 5). Rather, it is more likely that the book was gradually composed and redacted over the course of several generations by several different individuals from both the Deuteronomistic and the Priestly schools. While it is not certain, recent scholarship strongly suggests that the book was composed during the reign of Hezekiah and Josiah, "about 200 to 600 years after the actual events" took place (New Interpreter's 556). If this hypothesis is correct, this means the book was composed in large part between 722 B.C.E. to 609 B.C.E., around the time the book of Deuteronomy is believed to have been written.

Recent scholarship has generally accepted this date, mainly because the book is so heavily influenced by that of Deuteronomy that it is likely they were composed during the same period. Furthermore, the content of the book suggests it was written with a "monarchical viewpoint": the book presents Joshua as a king-like figure, leading the

army of Israel under his command in a united effort to drive out the Canaanites (556). It is therefore necessary to examine the reign of King Josiah especially, which lasted from approximately 649 to 609 B.C.E. Josiah's rule was marked by reform: he felt that the people of Israel had forgotten and disobeyed the rules of God, and that God had punished Israel for "forgetting" the law by sending the Assyrians to conquer them (New Interpreter's 568). Josiah called for a "return to the law" to remedy the situation. He stressed the importance of obeying Mosaic law, purged the cults of the land, and refurbished the Davidic Temple (570).

Viewed in this context, the book of Joshua can be seen as a call to return to the laws of God and to take back Israel's lost territory. "Joshua's conquest of Canaan can be taken as a precursor of Josiah's re-conquest of Israel"; the book shows that success is possible if Israel closely observes and obeys God's law and fights together as one army (556). The story of Joshua can also be viewed as an attempt to scare Josiah's adversaries into obeisance, as the book makes clear that the Lord will punish both external *and* internal enemies (577).

Priestly contributions are also present in the book, which were likely added either during or after the Babylonian Exile (557). It is generally agreed that the story of the army's circumcision in Chapter Five is a priestly addition (580). However, other than this example, the Priestly additions to the story are few in number and are clearly overshadowed by the contributions from the Deuteronomists.

It is also worth noting that the narration of the battle of Jericho, the topic of Joshua 6:15-21, is almost certainly not a recording of *actual* historical events. Archaeological evidence strongly suggests that the earliest date for the Israelites'

conquest of Canaan is 1400 B.C.E., while the latest date of Jericho's destruction is around 1550 B.C.E. Indeed, during Joshua's lifetime the city of Jericho likely did not have any walls left at all (Bowker 96). It is more likely that the "city" described in Joshua 6:15-21 was actually a smaller town or village located near Jericho. However, this does not take away from the story's liturgical importance, which will be examined below.

Delineation of the Passage

The book of Joshua comes directly after the completion of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible. It marks the beginning of the second section of the bible, the *Nevi'im*, or the Prophets. This section is then broken down into two groups: the "historical books" – Joshua through 2 Kings, minus Ruth – and the "writing prophets" – Isaiah through Malachi, minus Daniel. These two groups are also referred to as the "former prophets" and the "latter prophets," with the historical books falling underneath the former (Woudstra 3).

The book of Joshua is part of a much larger story. It marks the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham -- Israel finally conquers the Promised Land. The story of the land begins in the book of Genesis, when God promises Canaan to the descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After delivering the people from Egypt, God forces the disobedient generation to wander the desert for forty years. The next generation conquers the land east of the Jordan River under Moses' command in Deuteronomy. At the end of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses dies on the border of the promised land, and leadership of Israel is passed over to Joshua. The book of Joshua continues from this point

(Gangloff 3; Craigie 128-129). Indeed, it is the long-awaited culmination of this long line of events.

The book is divided into two parts, each of which is divided into two subdivisions:

- 1.) The Conquests (1.1 – 12.24)
 - A.) Preparations for the conquests (1.1 – 5.12)
 - B.) The conquest campaigns (5.13 – 12.24)
- 2.) Allotment of the land (13.1 – 24.33)
 - A.) Allotment of the conquered land (13.1 – 21.45)
 - B.) Epilogue (22.1 – 24.33) (New Oxford Annotated Bible 315)

Joshua 6:15-21 falls under the section of “conquest campaigns,” as it describes Joshua’s siege of the city of Jericho. The story of Jericho actually begins at 5:13 and ends at 6:27. This particular passage describes the actual taking of the city and the slaughtering of its inhabitants. The battle is one of the most important parts of the book of Joshua because it marks Israel’s first victory west of the Jordan River; it is this battle that sets in motion the larger campaign of conquering all of Canaan.

There are several points worth noting about the book as a whole to better understand the passage in question. First, chapter 1 of the book serves as a preface, while chapters 23-24 serve as an epilogue “which set the meaning of these events in historical context” (Boadt 196). These chapters serve the purpose of framing the events of the book in the context of the Deuteronomistic History, which describes how Israel conquered the promised land, how Israel lost the land as a punishment from God, and how Israel could retake it (New Interpreter’s 565). The message of the Deuteronomistic History is that Israel’s success depends on its obedience of God’s commands (Bowker 92).

Several important events take place before the battle of Jericho. In chapter 1, as noted above, the Lord tells Joshua that he is to take over as the leader of Israel. The Lord assures Joshua that he will be with him as he was with Moses and tells Joshua that he will “put this people in possession of the land that [he] swore to their ancestors.” Joshua then commands his army to prepare for battle.

Rather than plunging immediately into combat, Joshua orders two spies to survey the city of Jericho in chapter 2. The two spies enter the city and immediately visit the house of a prostitute, Rahab. When the king of the city hears of the spies’ presence, he orders Rahab to turn them over to him, but she lies and tells him the men have already left. The spies then promise to spare Rahab’s life after their army takes the city. They return to Joshua and assure him that the city “melts in fear before them” (Fewell and Gunn 119).

In chapters 3 and 4, Joshua’s army crosses to the west of the Jordan in a fashion very similar to Moses’ crossing of the Red Sea: the Lord stops the river’s flow and allows Israel to cross over on dry land. In chapter 5, before beginning the “holy war,” Joshua’s

army circumcises themselves in order to purify themselves. Shortly after, God gives Joshua specific directions as to how he must conduct the battle.

Following the battle of Jericho, Joshua and his army go on to enter and conquer the promised land, instituting the *herem* on nearly every conquered city as instructed by the Lord. After the conquest, the territory is divided up between the tribes of Israel. The book continues in chapter 23 with a speech by Joshua in which he exhorts the people to stay faithful to the Lord or else surely face his wrath. Chapter 24 marks the conclusion of the book, where Joshua calls the tribes together at Shechem and makes the people affirm their covenant with God.

Verse-by-Verse Analysis

Joshua 6: 15-21 illustrates the deeper meaning behind the *herem*, showing that it is not simply an act of mindless violence. Rather, this passage shows that the Lord commands the *herem* to ensure that Israel remains religiously pure and therefore loyal.

Joshua 6:15-16

(15) On the seventh day they rose early, at dawn, and marched around the city in the same manner seven times. It was only on that day that they marched around the city seven times. (16) And at the seventh time, when the priests had blown the trumpets, Joshua said to the people, “Shout! For the Lord has given you the city” (New Oxford Annotated Bible).

(15) On the seventh day, they rose at daybreak and marched around the city, in the same manner, seven times; that was the only day that they marched around the city seven times. (16) On the seventh round, as the priests blew the horns, Joshua commanded the people, “Shout! For the Lord has given you the city” (Jewish Study Bible).

(15) On the seventh day they rose at dawn and marched seven times round the city in the same way; that was the only day on which they marched round the city seven times. (16) The seventh time, as the priests blew the trumpets, Joshua said to the army, “Shout! The Lord has given you the city” (Oxford Study Bible).

These verses refer to the specific instructions the Lord gave to Joshua in 6:1-14. The Lord instructed Joshua to march around the city once a day for six days, with seven priests blowing seven ram’s horns (trumpets) before the Ark of the Covenant. On the seventh day, the army was to march around the city seven times, again with seven priests blowing seven trumpets before the Ark. After the seventh time around the city, the Lord told Joshua he must instruct his army to shout as the priests delivered a long blast with

the horns; this act would cause the city's wall to fall flat, allowing the soldiers to charge straight in. Beginning in 6:16, Joshua reiterates the Lord's commands to his army.

The phrase "The Lord has given you the city" appears in each of the translations and is particularly important. It is meant to make clear the fact that it is the Lord, not the people, who makes the victory possible (New Interpreter's 613). Without God's help, Joshua's army would be powerless and unable to conquer the fortified city. It also illustrates the fact that the people must follow the Lord's instructions to the exact detail. His instructions could not be more specific, which implies that if they are not carried out as he wants them to be, he will not help them in battle.

The presence of the ram's horns, or trumpets, is also important. During biblical times, the horns were used both in war and in worship. In times of war, they were used to issue signals and assemble troops into battle. Here, in the battle of Jericho, they were used to signal when the troops should "shout" and prepare to charge. But the horns also served a religious function. Traditionally used to signal the coming of important religious festivals and events, in the battle of Jericho they were used to signal the start of a "holy war," which is a war in which God directly intervenes in battle or gives the leader of his army supernatural powers in order to deliver military victory (Eerdman's 1337; Harris and Platzner 176). In this case, the Lord directly intervened, promising to force the city wall to collapse so Joshua's army could "charge straight in." The use of the horns in this story most closely resembles their use in Gideon's battle against the Midianites in Judges 7:15-23. In this battle, the horns were blown, signaling for the soldiers to shout and charge the city in unison to attack (New Interpreter's 613).

The repetitive use of the number "seven," which appears fourteen times in the chapter, is also important. Although it is not explicitly stated, the seventh day on which the attack commences is believed to be the Sabbath, a holy day (Boling 205). The number seven is a "biblical idiom for completeness" and signals the "totality of the ensuing territorial possession" (Adele et al 473). It also invokes the Seven Days Creation account (473).

Finally, the act of marching around the city is also important. During biblical times, this was done to "lay claim to a territory" (Boling 205-206). In this verse, God is laying claim to the city of Jericho by ordering Joshua's army to march around the city.

No important variations between the translations are present in these verses.

Joshua 6:17

(17) "The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall live because she hid the messengers we sent" (New Oxford Annotated Bible).

(17) "The city and everything in it are to be proscribed for the Lord; only Rahab the harlot is to be spared, and all who are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers we sent" (Jewish Study Bible).

(17) “The city is to be under a solemn ban: everything in it belongs to the Lord. No one is to be spared except the prostitute Rahab and everyone who is with her in the house, because she hid the messengers we sent” (Oxford Study Bible).

The phrases “devoted to the Lord,” “proscribed to the Lord,” and “solemn ban” all refer to the concept of the *herem*. When a city is placed under the *herem*, all that are living there are to be put to death – men, women, children, and livestock. It is of the utmost importance to understand that the Lord is not ordering a mindless act of violence. Rather the *herem* is first and foremost meant to prevent “spiritual contagion” (New Bible Commentary 244; Boling 205). The theme of the Deuteronomistic History is that Israel’s very survival depended on their loyalty to God: when they are loyal to him, he will provide for them; but when they turn away from him in favor of other gods or disobey him, they will be swiftly punished. The *herem* is therefore meant to ensure that the people *will not* be lured into worshipping the Canaanite gods. If the Canaanites are wiped out, then their religion is wiped out as well, erasing any chance that Israel will fall into the trap of worshipping false gods. The book of Judges, which will be discussed in-depth later, illustrates what happens when the people *do not* institute the *herem* on conquered cities – the people of Israel inevitably begin worshipping Canaanite gods, and the Lord punishes them as a result.

It is also important to note that Joshua agrees to spare Rahab from the *herem*. She is spared not only because she agreed to hide Joshua’s spies in chapter two, but also because she expressed a fear of and belief in the Lord’s power. She tells the spies before they leave her house that she has heard of God’s power and asserts, “Yahweh your god is indeed god in the heavens and the earth below” (Fewell and Gunn 118). The fact that she is saved shows that the Lord has mercy and saves those who have faith (New Interpreter’s Bible 564). He would not allow one who is faithful to him to be slaughtered, not even one who is a Canaanite prostitute. This further illustrates the point that the *herem* is not simply an act of gratuitous violence.

Joshua 6:18-19

(18) “As for you, keep away from the things devoted to destruction, so as not to covet and take any of the devoted things and make the camp of Israel an object for destruction, bringing trouble upon it. (19) But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord” (New Oxford Annotated Bible).

(18) “But you must beware of that which is proscribed, or else you will be proscribed: if you take anything from that which is proscribed, you will cause the camp of Israel to be proscribed; you will bring calamity upon it. (19) All the silver and gold and objects of copper and iron are consecrated to the Lord; they must go into the treasury of the Lord” (Jewish Study Bible).

(18) “And you must beware of coveting anything that is forbidden under the ban; you must take none of it for yourselves, or else you will put the Israelite camp

itself under the ban and bring disaster on it. (19) All silver and gold, all the vessels of copper and iron, are to be holy; they belong to the Lord and must go into his treasury” (Oxford Study Bible).

These two verses illustrate the importance of carrying out the *herem* to its completion. If the people do not obey by either leaving some in the town alive or taking devoted precious metals, then the Israelites themselves will be destroyed. Joshua warns his army that disobedience will bring “trouble,” “disaster,” or “calamity” upon the camp, for the Lord punishes the disobedient. This verse foreshadows the sin of Achan, who did not obey the *herem* and invoked the wrath of God upon Israel’s army in chapter seven (New Oxford 323-324).

The fact that livestock and precious metals are placed under the *herem* also serves to illustrate that God will provide the Israelites with what they need – they do not *need* to plunder because the Lord is on their side. Again, it is emphasized that Israel is *entirely dependant* on the Lord; they cannot and will not survive if he does not provide for him (New Interpreter’s 613).

Once again, no important variations between the translations are present.

Joshua 6: 20-21

(20) So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. (21) Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys (New Oxford Annotated Bible).

(20) So the people shouted when the horns were sounded. When the people heard the sounds of the horns, the people raised a mighty shout and the wall collapsed. The people rushed into the city, every man straight in front of him, and they captured the city. (21) They exterminated everything in the city with the sword: man and woman, young and old, ox and sheep and ass (Jewish Study Bible).

(20) So the trumpets were blown, and when the army heard the trumpets sound, they raised a great shout, and the wall collapsed. The army advanced on the city, every man straight ahead, and they captured it. (21) Under the ban they destroyed everything there; they put everyone to the sword, men and women, young and old, as well as the cattle, the sheep, and the donkeys (Oxford Study Bible).

Joshua is no longer addressing the people in these verses; rather, these two verses describe the actual act of taking the city. Joshua’s army carries out the Lord’s commands exactly, and the result is a complete victory. Just as the Lord promised, the wall promptly collapsed as soon as the army “raised a great shout.” This is further proof that the Lord keeps his promises to his people and aids those who worship him. Furthermore, the *herem* is carried out as ordered, eliminating any chance of “spiritual contagion” in the

future. “The Lord was with Joshua,” and delivered his loyal servant a victory (New Oxford Annotated, Jos 6: 27). Joshua 6:15-21 is therefore consistent with the central theme of Deuteronomistic History: when the people obey the laws and rules of the Lord, he will allow them to prosper. As long as Joshua and his followers obey the law, they cannot be defeated (Harris and Platzner 175).

Joshua 6:15-21 in Relation to Other Passages

Reference to the *herem* in the book of Deuteronomy illustrates its purpose in the bible. Deuteronomy 7:1-2 is the first reference to the *herem* in the bible. These verses state, “When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you... and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.” Deuteronomy 7:12-18 states that livestock and precious metals must also be destroyed under the *herem*. Deuteronomy 20:16-18 explains *why* the *herem* is necessary. This passage states that towns that worship false gods must be “annihilated,” “so they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God” (New Oxford Annotated). In short, the Lord wants to ensure that his people do not fall victim to what Boling refers to as “spiritual contagion” (205).

Following the battle of Jericho, the *herem* is used nine different times in the book of Joshua alone. During the conquest of the rest of the promised land, Joshua’s army “left no one breathing” in Ai, Magedah, Libnah, Lachish, Gezer, Eglon, Hebron, Debir, and Hazor. However, the Lord allowed the army to take the livestock and booty for themselves after conquering Ai and Hazor; these are the only times he allowed them to do so (Gangloff 13). In each of the above battles, Joshua closely followed the instructions of the Lord and carried out the *herem* as commanded. Joshua 24:31 reads, “Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua,” and it is therefore no coincidence that Israel prospered during Joshua’s lifetime. It is for this reason that Joshua addressed Israel before he died and warned them to stay faithful to God after his death, for if they did not, they would certainly be punished. Joshua warned, “Be very careful therefore, to love the Lord your God. For if you turn back, and join the survivors of these nations left here among you...know assuredly that the Lord your God will not continue to drive out these nations before you...” (New Oxford Annotated, Joshua 23:11-13). When he called tribes to meet at Shechem, he further warned the people that if they abandoned God in favor of false gods, then “He will turn and do you harm” (Joshua 24:20).

The bible is full of examples of those who suffer when they do not obey the Lord and carry out the *herem* in battle. The first of which is the story of Achan, a Judahite who disobeyed the words Joshua gave his army in 6:16-19 and took some of the “devoted” precious metals from Jericho. Just as Joshua warned, Achan’s sin brought “calamity” upon Israel. Joshua’s army went to attack the city of Ai, but they were badly routed and forced to retreat. When Joshua asked the Lord why his army had been defeated that day, the Lord replied that it was punishment for disobeying the *herem*.

When Achan's sin was discovered, he and his family and his livestock were stoned to death (Harris and Platzner 176).

King Saul serves as another example of an individual who suffered the consequences of failing to carry out the *herem*. In 1 Samuel 15, Saul goes to war against the Amalekites and is instructed by the prophet Samuel to "utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" (New Interpreter's 560). Saul failed to carry out these orders, however, allowing the soldiers to keep the best livestock for themselves and capturing King Agag rather than slaying him. Samuel chastised Saul, telling him he had "done evil in the sight of the Lord" (Gangloff 16). Indeed, the Lord was so displeased with Saul that he "rejected [him] from being king" (1 Sam. 15:23).

The entire book of Judges also serves as an example of the Lord punishing those who do not follow his laws. Throughout Judges, the Israelites repeatedly did not use the *herem* against their enemies, and subsequently "did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord," by worshipping other gods. As punishment, God "gave them over to plunderers who plundered them" (Harris and Platzner 182). From time to time, the Lord would heed the people's "groaning" and would send a judge to deliver them from their oppressors. However, after the judge died, Israel would again abandon God, and He would again deliver them into the hands of their enemies as punishment (183). These examples further illustrate the point that the *herem* was used in order to keep Israel spiritually loyal to the Lord.

Practical Applications

The lesson behind Joshua 6:15-21 is that one cannot read the bible in a cursory manner and assume that one will understand its meaning. Indeed, a quick glance at this particular passage could lead the uninformed reader to believe that God condones or even encourages violence and genocide. But the passage actually serves to emphasize the fact that people are completely reliant on God, and therefore *must* obey his laws and commands. During the time of Joshua, the *herem* was a necessary evil; the Israelites were entirely dependent on God just for survival, and it was important that any threat to their loyalty be eliminated to ensure that the Lord would continue to protect them. This is *not* to say that the *herem* is a necessary evil today. During biblical times, God had to take on the role of a warrior because during this period war was a fact of everyday life, and gods were only considered successful if they delivered victories to their people (Boadt 97-98). Times have changed. War is no longer a matter of everyday life. Certainly, the *herem* is no longer a "necessary evil."

The other important lesson that should be taken away from this passage is that God always provides for those who are faithful to him. The Lord protects and provides for *all* that are loyal to him and obey him, whether they are valiant warriors such as Joshua or lowly, repenting prostitutes like Rahab. But it should also be noted that He will punish those who disobey him or worship other gods. Achan and Saul should serve as

reminders that even those who have been faithful to him in the past will be punished for violating His laws and commands.

Conclusion

While the Old Testament is certainly full of stories of violence, war, and slaughter, the reader must realize that each of these stories contains a deeper meaning. These tales are not included in the bible to advocate violence or glorify war. The story of the battle of Jericho was included in the book of Joshua to convey to the reader that it is of the utmost importance to remain loyal to God and follow his orders. The *herem*, while certainly a brutal practice, was a necessary evil that during that period served the very important purpose of eliminating the risk of Israel falling into the trap of worshipping false gods. Their very survival, like our own, depended entirely on the Lord, and the *herem* ensured that they would not put themselves in a position to fall out of his favor.

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