

A Narrative-Critical Exegesis Of Joshua 2: “Rahab, A Paradigm Of Faith” (Or: A Woman Shows The Way?)

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Book Of Joshua: Historical And Theological Context For The Rahab Story

The Book of Joshua, critical in the development of Israel’s story, is about the conquest of the Promised Land, which was a “newsworthy event” (Boling 1982: 3) that was passed on from generation to generation because it explained the real meaning of Israel’s past. Israel’s theology was derived from history, from an understanding of what was going on, and what the collected tradition of past events signified. The Book of Joshua, in developing Covenant theology, is seen as part of the Deuteronomic corpus of literature. It is a continuation of the Book of Deuteronomy, which is sharply separate from the rest of the literature of the Pentateuch. Campbell says that the Deuteronomic History (henceforth DH) was certainly written at a time that was critical not only for Israel’s existence but also for its faith (1989: 142-143).

The Book of Joshua expresses the theology of Deuteronomy that emphasizes the “oneness of Yahweh” (Curtis 1994: 17) and that the response required from Israel is love of God expressed by total commitment, total obedience. This response of total

obedience becomes a major refrain throughout the DH. Israel's success or failure is dependent upon obedience to the Law, the Deuteronomic Code. The land itself, a divine gift to Israel, comes to represent the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. The gift of the land, promised to them (through Abraham and later Moses), is linked with the theological issues which are resolved in the theology of covenant, wherein the Israelite people, united and distinguished (from outsiders) in their faith and worship are guaranteed their protection and success (against outsiders) on condition of fidelity. The unity of the people is understood as a reflection of the oneness of God. This idea of unity is certainly foundational to the theme of the exclusivity of Israel and the apparent divine order to annihilate foreigners – those they conquer – expressed in Deut.20: 16-18. Now this does not sit comfortably with the Deuteronomic requirement to observe social justice (Deut. 24). This fundamental contradiction is not resolved in the DH. Yahweh has shown love for Israel by giving them freedom and land (Ex. 6: 6-8), so Israel must now respond by being obedient. The Book of Joshua highlights this conditionality in the story in Chapter 7 of Achan's sin. Achan disobeyed, and as a result, Israel (represented by the thirty-six) suffered (they were killed). Achan demonstrates a lack of faith (through disobedience) and is punished by the Lord. Disobedience, which signals a turning away from God, results in chaos.

Thus the DH is characterised by the emphasis on God as "sovereign Lord" (Boadt 1984: 205), and is a narrative written with a theological sub-structure. The story is always written from a perspective that privileges the motivating and underlying theology. This means that the reader is one who accepts the theology of the discourse. In the context of narrative criticism then, the implied reader would be seen as belonging to a believing

community. However, there may now be a discrepancy between the response of the implied reader and that of the actual reader, who has the benefit of hindsight. This discrepancy is not necessarily unwanted. For example, the text can now be examined for the perspective it offers in the light of current theology, especially Christian theology.

The Story Of Rahab Has To Be Read Within The Context Of The Conquest Narrative

Rahab's story interrupts an otherwise continuous narrative. Joshua Chapter 1 could move straight to Chapter 3 without losing anything, in terms of conquest details. What purpose then does this interruption serve? The answer to this question lies in the story's narrative (literary), historical and theological functions, or what Sternberg calls the complexity of "multifunctional discourse" (1985: 41).

In his discussion of the plot in the Book of Joshua, Hawk presents the idea that it is "the presence of both fulfilment and unfulfilment" of desire (that is, the promise) "at the beginning of Joshua" which "demonstrates a tension that constitutes the principle dynamic of the story" (1991: 40). While the Rahab story may be an interruption (or disruption) in the flow of the narrative, whether or not it is a disruption in Israel's advance is open to argument. On the one hand, there is a disruption (narratively speaking) in the fulfilment of the overarching desire of Israel (the Rahab story represents a delay in the taking of Jericho) but on the other hand, Rahab achieves her desire/fulfilment (a guarantee of safety for her family and the right to remain in the land), with the consequence of the successful conquest of Jericho. This could be interpreted as implying a cause and effect relationship between Rahab's story and the

successful conquest, which is by no means substantiated by the narrative; however, what might be suggested in the text is that Joshua has reason to fear that Israel is not deserving of God's support and so feels the need to spy out the land. This supports the position that Rahab has been integrated into the conquest narrative. In Rahab's story, there is a glimpse of fulfilment in terms of a particular person/event, which has been inserted into the general (that is "all Israel") story. Her story functions as a brief reminder that fulfilment is possible on the condition that there is fidelity to the one God. So Rahab presents the possibility of success before the actual success (the conquest of Jericho). Following the acquisition of Jericho there is another story (Achan) which is a reminder that the fulfilment of the promise is not a forgone conclusion. The story of Rahab is a repetition of a story type – the tale begins and ends as a spy story (2:1 and 2:24, also 6: 25b – “an *inclusio* pattern” (Powell 1990: 32-33), similar to other stories when reconnaissance of land, in preparation for assault, is undertaken. Hawk (2000: Ch 3) makes a comparison between Rahab and Tamar, the former, a prostitute who secures her place within Israel through her covenant with the spies, and the latter, who masquerades as a prostitute to secure her place within Israel. This repetition of story type and the interesting parallel between the two women would not go unnoticed by the implied reader of the text.

The parallel includes more than that between the two women. Bird also makes the point that the story of Rahab, like the story of Tamar (Gen 38), is a discrete literary unit, with its own tradition, clearly set off from the surrounding material. She maintains that the history of the story is complex, both in its literary and pre-literary stages and that:

“while an attempt has been made to integrate the tale into the now dominant account of

the miraculous fall of Jericho, the narrative in Joshua 2 can still be analysed as a discrete literary unit” (1989: 126).

The discreteness is discerned in terms of language and images that are used and Bird explains that the narratives in the DH represent a particularly compressed and selective form of story-telling art, in which individual terms or figures must carry more weight of suggested meaning than in the more expansive prose of the modern novel. This means that for the reader there is a heightened awareness and significance of the reference, for example, to “harlot”.

The Story Of Rahab: Structure (Including The Limits Of The Story) And Narrative Techniques

The whole of Chapter 2, together with Josh. 6: 17b (a later redaction pointing both to the etiological function of the story and to the Deuteronomic theological interpretation) and 6: 22 – 25, contains the story of the harlot Rahab. Josh. 3: 1 is also usually included, because it “rounds off” the story of the reconnaissance and arrival at the Jordan in preparation for the taking of Jericho.

The Rahab plot raises some very interesting and narrative-critical issues. Is there any significance in Shittim being the point of departure? Shittim, according to Num. 25: 1, was the place where Israel “began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab”, that is, worship the Ba’al gods, rather than the one true God. In the context of Israel’s story, prostitution serves as metaphor for the violation of Yahweh’s covenant. There is an interesting irony in the reversal here, the story moves from the “place of harlotry” (with

its associations of infidelity to God's law) to the "place of the harlot" (who expresses absolute faith in the Lord God). "In a symbolic sense, Rahab is a synthesis of all that is most threatening to Israel, a point which the narrator underscores by the names given her: woman, prostitute, Rahab" (Hawk 1991: 61). The naming of Rahab as "harlot" is narratively significant because it presents a paradox – the prostitute doesn't signify violation of the covenant, but a commitment to it! Surely this contrast would not go unnoticed, nor unappreciated, by the implied reader!

Next we have the men from Israel coming to the house of the harlot, who is immediately identified. This identification of her by name denotes great significance. In terms of the narrative, both the immediate and the conquest, it is important for the reader to remember Rahab's existence and role. Dana Nolan Fewell makes the point that women do not feature in the conquest narrative, and the women who do appear are "visible only because they represent some kind of exception" (in Newsom & Ringe 1992: 64). Rahab is an exception relative to the other players in the drama because she demonstrates a commitment to God superior to that even of Joshua. In future recounts of this story, the Hebrew people will be reminded of the significance of Rahab's actions, in saving the lives of the spies and in her profession of faith.

The next narrative detail is the mention of the king of Jericho, who remains, significantly, nameless in the story (keeping the focus firmly on the "hero" Rahab) but who receives information about the arrival of the Israelites, whose mission is to "view the land" (v.1) or "search out the land" (v.2) within his jurisdiction – information which the reader has received three times within the space of three verses, and which follows

the narrative technique of repetition to emphasise key points. Why does the king send to Rahab for information? The text offers no explanation, and there lies the key. In terms of narrative criticism, it is not deemed important for the reader (implied or real), to know the “why”, rather the concern is with keeping the narrative focus on Rahab. The reader, entering into the world of Rahab and the spies, would accept the reality of such a situation. It is her actions, subsequent to the king’s demands, that hold the key to the reader’s interest, the narrative’s resolution and its theological significance. Rahab makes a most important choice. She freely elects to change her allegiance from her own Canaanite lord or “suzerain” (McKenzie 2000: 25) to the God of Israel (her *magnalia dei*). She demonstrates protection of Joshua’s messengers and fidelity to the One God, through her recitation of the Deuteronomic credal statement, wherein the story of Yahweh’s saving actions are retold. The repetition of the motif of “protection/saving of the messengers” (Olyan 1996: 201) could also indicate a later inclusion (redaction) to emphasise the social justice aspect of the developing theology, in keeping with a post Josiah-reform theology. The “letter of the law” mentality of strict obedience to the Deuteronomic code is being developed, or perhaps even critiqued, to allow for a more inclusive and tolerant attitude reflecting a theology centred on love of God rather than covenantal obedience. (The theology is being broadened – which could be seen as a pun on the word “Rahab,” which means “broad”.)

The Rahab story, while indicating further developments in theology, also reinforces Deuteronomic theology as evinced by Moses and Joshua. Hess proposes that:

The historical reports of God’s acts form the centre of the confession of Rahab. Although the two events recounted frame the whole sojourn in the wilderness, they do more. The account of the exodus has as its subjects the LORD who dries up the waters and Israel who comes forth from Egypt...

Rahab has learned her history well and responds with a reaffirmation of the fear of those who oppose Israel and with the confession that only Israel's God controls the destiny of the world (1996: 89 – 90).

Rahab requests a treaty, to which the spies agree. It seems they have little choice, they have been rescued, they must respond likewise. At this point the Rahab story takes on something of an allegorical character. Rahab could represent Israel, while the spies could be acting as "Joshua", namely "The Lord is Salvation". Rahab (Israel) wants a treaty/covenant, and bargains the terms. The spies (or "God" in the allegory) agree, how else can they act when faced with such a profession of faith? The tables are turned (when the spies are safe), however, and it is then the spies (that is "God") who set the conditions for honouring the covenant. The allegorical nature of this story cannot be pushed too far, however, because the saving of the spies does not seem to have a parallel in relation to Yahweh. Could there be a very subtle reversal here in that Rahab takes on the role of Yahweh, while the spies now represent Israel? The saving of the spies would then be paralleled by the saving of Israel, in which case Rahab's story becomes a critique both of Israel's behaviour and the Deuteronomic theology. This reversal of the situation, that is, a change in who is calling the shots, could indicate a later redaction of the folktale to fit the Deuteronomic theology. In a Deuteronomic context it has to be God (via his messengers) who initiates the covenant. The original narrative is simply a story of a woman who, for whatever motive, seizes the opportunity to save the messengers and in doing so saves herself and her family. Her action is deemed good and is rewarded.

The problem of Rahab's deceit, her profession and the approval accorded her and her behaviour by biblical writers, is minimised if the story is seen in the context of the

covenant initiated by Rahab and concluded with Joshua's spies. This covenant context not only solves the problem of Rahab herself, but also goes a long way to solving the dilemma of the spies acting contrary to the Deuteronomic code. Their entering into treaty with a Canaanite directly contravenes the prescription of Deut. 20: 16 – 18. The Book of Joshua's attack on "syncretism" (Curtis 1994: 19), however, is reinforced by the Rahab story rather than contradicted by it, because Rahab has already acknowledged the God of Israel as her God. Thus her acceptance of Yahweh as the only God precludes any possibility of a Canaanite adulteration occurring (of her bringing her Ba'al gods with her). The editor thus recounts the Deuteronomic history/theology, but at the same time comments on the outcome. The reader accepts that Rahab is no danger to Israel. In fact she is the epitome of the very faithfulness that is required of Israel, and which is not shown by Achan in Chapter 7.

The story of Rahab, however, should not be viewed in isolation. While there is evidence of structural patterns within the story, perhaps more significantly is the pattern that it forms in relation to the later story of Achan. Together these stories form a theologically important contrast, which provides the framework for understanding the religious meaning of the conquest. Our interest lies in the discernment of a reversal of the expected order – "Rahab is the quintessential Canaanite who becomes part of Israel (is faithful), Achan is the quintessential Israelite who betrays his people" (Spina 2001: 53). Each becomes the "spiritual other". Enclosing the story of the possession of the land, the fulfilment of the Promise, this reversal takes on theological significance. "The concern to define identity controls the logic of holy war in Joshua. All native inhabitants must be destroyed because they threaten Israel's identity" (Fewell 1992: 63). The Rahab

story, however, challenges the logic of holy war, and highlights the identity of the Israelite now defined in theological (covenantal) terms rather than geographical or national terms.

What Theology Emerges?

What are the possible readings of the Rahab story?

- Is it etiological in purpose, explaining as it does the existence of Canaanites in later Israel?
- Is it a critique of the Deuteronomic code that seems to demand annihilation of the foreigner?
- Is it evidence of a developing theology that is moving beyond the ideological/political expedience of social control to ensure unity and exclusion?
- Is it expressing a theology of inclusion based on faith and allegiance rather than race?

The answer, of course, is that it is probably all of these and more. It is through the Rahab story that the ambiguity of theology becomes apparent. On the one hand the Law demands that Israel maintain its separateness, physically/geographically (by removal of “others”), to ensure its identity as the one nation, dedicated to God, owing allegiance to only one God. On the other hand Rahab represents those “others” who by virtue of their faith are “justified”. Rahab in contrast to Achan symbolises fidelity. The irony of the narrative lies in the fact that it is the “outsider” (who should be annihilated according to Deut. code), who knows the Lord God and enters into covenant with him, thereby becoming included in Israel (albeit on the perimeter!), while the “insider” (Achan) disobeys the Law and suffers annihilation. As Campbell writes:

The Deuteronomic History is a magnificent achievement as a literary work. Part of its greatness as a theological document is its refusal to give up on the ambiguity and inherent messiness of the human situation (1989: 249).

The DH gives a most important insight into the nature of God within history. The commitment of God to Israel is unconditional; it is not broken by the people's lack of faith or failure to adhere to the law, which is implied by the Deuteronomic code (and is confirmed by the story of Joshua, as a result of editing according to the Josiah reform). The story of Rahab challenges the notion of covenant based on strict adherence to a law; within the DH it develops a theology of covenant based on fidelity of love and honour rather than obedience to the Law. While the DH maintains the Deuteronomic theology which has all "outsiders killed" to maintain Israel's unity, and integrity is guaranteed by "keeping the covenant". Rahab's story challenges and refines that theology. Her story suggests that ideologically not all outsiders were killed and Israel's integrity was to be guaranteed by its religious purity rather than national exclusivity.

It seems clear therefore that the story of Rahab falls into the category of stories of local significance and old tradition, which have been collected to form a larger work of both national and theological significance. The story of Rahab therefore plays a narrative - critical role. It is a story through which the reader can enter into the world of the outsider who becomes a part of the community. The narrative elicits a dynamic interpretative relationship between text and reader. This is especially relevant when it is a question of a modern reader. The reader may bring to the text a wealth of knowledge of historical and form critical considerations, which will enhance appreciation, or s/he may come with very little preparation. One of the benefits of narrative criticism is the fact that it does not depend solely on prior knowledge; it is the text itself which is the

basis for critical understanding. The drama of Rahab's story is apparent in the movement of the tale, the setting, the "discourse time" (Fokkelman 1999: 35-37) and particularly the characters. It is a combination of a spy story and a "woman of dubious reputation who saves the men" story. It is charged with interesting elements: the sordid setting, the secrecy of the acts, the clever duping of the villains, the resolution and the happy ending (especially for Rahab and through her, for Israel itself). It exhibits patterns in its structure that lend themselves to oral recounting. It appears simple in its message and there is only one name to remember. This relatively short tale packs a theological punch that would have been obvious to the implied reader and is indeed obvious to the real, historical (present) reader. Love of God and faithfulness to him bring their own reward – inclusion in his community. Rahab exhibits honour in her dealings with the Israelites. She in turn is honoured by a foremost place in their story.

In developing a narrative-critical exegesis of the Rahab story it is obvious that a simple application of literary theory and approach is not possible. While there is much to be gained from using literary theory to enhance our understanding of Biblical texts, narrative criticism can not work in exactly the same way as secular literary criticism. What makes narrative criticism different is that there is a theology, underpinning the text, which must be taken into account. This theology was evolving before the text was written, as the text was being written, between editions of the text, and can now emerge for the particular reader in the present.

Thus, in Biblical literature there is created within the one text an interface between evolved theology and evolving theology. The tension at this interface often results in

apparent ambiguity and it is this ambiguity that can be responsible for the dynamism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the story of Rahab.

Conclusion: What Might Be The Relevance Of Rahab's Story?

The Deuteronomic History can be read as having relevance within the Christian context. In particular the Rahab story represents commitment to faith, which is not just expressed by a confession, a profession of the creed, but is lived out in action. This action demonstrates the public declaration of her faith (she declares it to the two men, and her subsequent survival in the Israel community will be a public declaration), which is now seen in the context of community. Christianity is about community; it cannot remain simply at the level of an individual's personal profession of faith, it requires commitment to the community of believers and beyond.

The "otherness" of Rahab speaks powerfully to those who are marginalized in the community, those who by virtue of their race, occupation, status, or gender regard themselves, or are regarded by others, as "not belonging", maybe even unworthy of belonging. Rahab's story can be interpreted in the light of Paul's teaching (Gal. 3: 28) that no matter whether gentile or Jew, man or woman, free or slave, all belong to the community of God. All are called to a relationship with God, through Jesus. A parallel can be drawn between the Joshua/Rahab story and the Christian story. As the name Joshua means "The Lord is salvation", transliterated in the Greek as Jesus, and the relationship between Joshua (via the agency of his messengers) and Rahab is one of saving action, a parallel can be seen between this relationship and that between Jesus and humanity. A further interpretation depicts Rahab as a saviour of the two spies. It is

through her courage and steadfastness, an echo of the characteristic required of Joshua, that they are saved and brought into the kingdom (Jericho). Each Christian is called to bring others in to Christ's kingdom. As Rahab achieves, through her actions, a real belonging (in the faith community of Israel), so too will we, in working to bring others in to the kingdom, realise our own belonging.

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