

## An Unlikely Hero Joshua 2:1-24

### Day 1: Joshua 2:1-24 You want me to tell this to my kids?!

The book of Joshua begins with two vignettes: the first about Joshua (Joshua 1), and the second about Rahab (Joshua 2). Joshua is a traditional or conventional hero: male, majority ethnicity, military background, forceful, and faithful. He is the sort of hero that military and political literature is full of: George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, George Patton, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower, 'Stormin' Norman' Schwarzkopf. Rahab is none of these: a woman in a male-chauvinistic world, a pagan in a Jewish world, a foreigner in a nationalistic world, and a sex worker in a moralistic world.

This narrative and its inclusion in the Bible are striking in itself, but even more so in this: at one level, the story is entirely superfluous. Had the author skipped directly from Joshua the war hero and president (Joshua 1) to the crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 3), there would be no obvious gap. We would not notice anything essential to be missing in the plot line. The incident says nothing crucial to the larger story, and it says a lot that is subversive to the values of Jewish (and traditional Christian) culture: the only competent person in Joshua 2 is a woman not a man, an enemy not a citizen, a worshipper of other gods not of Yahweh (until this point, at least), and immoral not respectable. At every level this is a story that ancient Jews – and mid-twentieth-century Christians – would not consider fit for spiritual edification or for citizen building. Nor the sort of resume we would desire in a youth pastor.

Yet when this author sets out the introduction for this book, he includes not just a typical hero story (Joshua), but also this radically subversive story, that stands opposed to the conventional morality (and sociology) of the former. What lesson would he want his readers – ancient or modern – to draw from this in-your-face anecdote? At the very least, that God is not a one-dimensional, conventional moralist, blithely endorsing the status quo of a male-dominated, moralistic, status-oriented and double-standard society. In the grand scheme of God's kingdom, virile, religious, male warriors can be heroes (or heels); so can immoral, irreligious, 'weak' females. Life is not always predictable, nor is God.

**Day 2: Joshua 2:1-24 and its contribution to the Bible's metanarrative: God, part 1.** Metanarrative, to review, is the overarching scheme or story which serves as the foundation for a culture or a worldview. To put it more simply, the biblical metanarrative is the story-line which runs from creation to fall through redemption to recreation, from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22, and from Adam through Abraham and Moses to Christ to the Second Coming. The primary focus

of the biblical narrative is God, ruler of heaven and earth, Lord of all nations.

What does this story contribute to that focus: what does it teach us about God, Israel's God and our own? In the days of Joshua, and for centuries before and after, deities were generally considered tribal. One clan or city would have this deity; another, that deity. In fact, the well-known Ba'al, mentioned often in Scripture as the Canaanite deity, was likely tribal and territorial: each major city or extended clan would worship its own Ba'al. In contrast, here is one of the Canaanites, a Ba'al worshipper – and not an especially religious one at that – who affirms that the God of her enemies is God not just over Israel or its territory, but even over hers, and more, over the entire world: “The LORD your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below” (2:11). This is a fundamental tenet of Scripture, and so evidently true that even some of his instinctive opponents end up affirming his supremacy.

**Day 3: Joshua 2:1-24 and its contribution to the Bible's metanarrative: God, part 2.** This Canaanite explicitly affirms the Jewish God is Lord over heaven and earth. But in telling this story, the author of Joshua implies an additional point: God is also redeemer. This story begins with God authorizing Israel to invade Canaan and kill the Canaanites en masse (we will look at the ethics of this in a coming week). Not just because Israel wants or needs land, but as the instruments of divine judgment. Generations earlier, God had told Abraham not to invade Canaan yet, “for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen 15:16). Just before they finally enter the land, Moses counsels his people, “Do not say to yourself, ‘The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.’ No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you” (Deut 9:4-5).

Yet here is one of the enemy of Israel, one of the wicked under divine sentence of condemnation, and God redeems and rescues her. And if her, then anyone today who, like her, embraces him, whatever their past or their current state. Our God is a redeemer, who loves all peoples and all races, who offers a second chance and a new life, who cares about the present and the future not the past, who welcomes sinners and transforms them into saints, and embraces his enemies as his friends. And, of course, he calls his people to be like him.

**Day 4: Joshua 2:1-24 and its contribution to the Bible's metanarrative: us.**

We have a strong desire to apply the Bible to ourselves. In part, this is commendable: God calls us not just to know stuff about him, but also to live

rightly before him. In part, though, this desire to apply the Bible to ourselves reflects self-preoccupation, even narcissism: does everything have to be about us, or can it be emotionally satisfying sometimes simply to celebrate who and what God is? To balance both values, we train ourselves to begin in any text with God, then (and only then) segueing to ourselves. This text reinforces two attributes of God. First, he is Lord over all the world, both Israel and the Canaanites, both those who worship him and those who do not. Second, he is not just judge of those who oppose him (though he is very much that), but also redeemer of those who repent and turn to him. Having begun with God, it is legitimate then to turn to Rahab: What can we learn from her example? How is she a role model for us?

By all measures, in her own time, she is not a role model, but an outcast. A woman (no offense intended: I am not saying that men are superior to women, only describing how they were generally viewed in Joshua's time). A Canaanite (no offense intended: I am not saying that contemporary Palestinians are inferior to Israelis, only describing how they were widely perceived in Joshua's time). A prostitute (no offense intended: I am not saying that contemporary prostitutes are inferior, say, to doctors or university professors ... in reality, a significant percentage of prostitutes are victims of childhood sexual abuse or adult sex trafficking, and thus more sinned-against than sinners). But still, she has few merits in her own right, in the eyes of society. Moreover, even when she acts heroically, she is hardly being virtuous. Instead, she is a liar and a traitor. (One of the more amusing – and silly – parts of the literature on this text is when commentators struggle with the Bible's obvious approval of a liar, as though readers might then take away the lesson that God condones lying. Oddly, commentators less commonly note the moral problem arising from her traitorous conduct.)

At the very least, we learn that our God is able to use anyone who will worship and serve him, whatever their natural qualifications or disqualifications. She is not only an example, but also a promise that whatever ability we lack, or disability we possess, he is able to use us, if we worship him and offer ourselves to him. You (or I) may not be flashy, or impressive, or especially gifted, particularly brilliant, much less notable, or even confident. But, realistically, whatever lack besets you, or whatever inferiority plagues you, whether real or imagined, surely you have more going for you than does the irreligious and immoral, social reject that is Rahab. At the very least, you tend to be religious, moral, and socially acceptable (you come to church!). So long as you do not trust in these modest attributes, but surrender yourself to God to empower and use as he sees fit, then you can be something useful, perhaps even heroic, in his hands.

**Day 5: Matthew 1:1-17 Rahab, ancestor of Jesus**

The story of Rahab does not end in Joshua. Instead, she appears repeatedly in the New Testament, not least significantly in Matthew 1, where she crops up, of all places, in the most prestigious family line in all of history: “Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab ... and Jesse the father of King David ... and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.” (1:5-6,16). Rahab becomes ancestor of the great King David, and the even greater Messiah Jesus.

Matthew includes four women in Jesus’ genealogy, a feature uncommon in itself. All four are remarkable – and surprising – beyond their gender: Tamar, notable for deceptively (and immorally) conceiving a child by her father-in-law Judah (Gen 38); Rahab, the prostitute (Josh 2); Ruth, the faithful but foreign woman (Ruth 1-4); and, Bathsheba (2 Sam 11), who is not mentioned by name but by scandal (“Uria’s wife”). Here is the perhaps the strongest statement of divine redemption: that such women could be in the ancestral line of Jesus, Son of God. So the genealogy of Jesus reinforces the redemptive grace of God, not only toward Rahab and others, but also toward us (and our children).

**Day 6: Hebrews 11 and James 2:14-26 Rahab, case study for Christians**

Rahab appears in two other places within the New Testament. In Hebrews 11, she is included among the faithful of the Old Testament, alongside such notables as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses: “By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient” (Heb 11:31). In fact, the author of Hebrews bemoans the lack of space to mention Gideon, Samson, David, Samuel, the prophets, or various heroes and martyrs. Yet he finds space for Rahab.

James, too, invokes her as a role model. In fact, facing even stricter space constraints, he finds room only for two role models: the great Abraham, father of all Israel, and the morally challenged foreign woman Rahab. Not even the great Abraham was justified through faith alone, without works; not even the lowly Rahab was justified through faith alone. The greatest of Old Testament saints, and the lowliest among them, demonstrate that none of us – from greatest to lowliest – can lay claim to saving faith if it does not issue in obedience: “A person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone... Faith without deeds is dead.” From the example of Rahab, we rightly learn the importance of faithfulness and action, as validation and confirmation of faith professed. But more than that, we rightly draw an important spiritual lesson from the fact that God invokes Rahab – and not just Abraham – to teach important spiritual lessons. In an important respect, God is himself radically inclusive, and subversive of middle-class, mainstream respectability.