

## "Between a Rock and a Hard Place"

Joshua 2:1-21; John 12:1-3 [For further study: Ezra 1:1-11]

[As my primary non-Biblical resource I have consulted *Joshua, The NIV Application Commentary*, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr.]

This is a companion, or perhaps better, the source and origin of a sermon I plan to preach on April 7th, 2019. What follows is a compilation of thoughts, points, lessons, and deductions based on or drawn from the marvelous story of Rahab the Canaanite prostitute. The "for further study" suggestion and brief passage is for the sole purpose of demonstrating that God, in his most wise and wonderful providence, sometimes chooses and uses for his indescribable, marvelous, and providential plans individuals that are surprisingly out of the mainstream of the realm of who we think God might, or ought to, use. Cyrus, king of Persia, was God's choice to not only see to the return of the exiles but also to provide part of the impetus for doing so and, seemingly, all the resources needed to build the temple in Jerusalem. A non-Israelite doing the work of God?! Indeed so! When it is said that God will not be constrained in any way by the human creature, so it is fact. The first chapter of Ezra is startling to some. But to those who have a bead, so to speak, on what "sovereignty" means, it is not that much of a surprise.

So it is with Rahab, noted vocationally as a prostitute but with no reference to any specific or particular activity along that line as far as our story goes according to Scripture. It is interesting, if not puzzling, why it is noted that she is a prostitute when that truth and reality have nothing to do with the story. Perhaps it is a simple demonstration that God can, has, and will simply use whomever he chooses for his divine purposes.

As we read, Joshua, with the Israelites standing chronologically and physically on the cusp of entering the Promised Land following their long sojourn in the desert and after the death of Moses, sends two spies to scout out the land they are about to invade and then inhabit. Some scholars claim that Joshua's sending this reconnoitering expedition reveals his lack of faith in God's providence and power. The claim is based on the [false in my view] supposition that God would rather deliver the land to them by Biblical-fashion miracle rather than using the wits, intelligence, and cunning of the human creature. Therefore, that Joshua sends in a reconnoitering force is claimed to be a rejection of God's providence and power and a reliance on human prowess. However, the Scriptures are filled with stories of God using human beings in terms of their intelligence and "prowess". I am convinced that God moved the hearts and minds of Joshua and the two unnamed spies no less than he did Cyrus.

In any event, the arrival of the two spies at Rahab's house was not lost on some of the citizens of Jericho and thus they relayed that information to the king of Jericho. The king then dispatched his own emissaries to Rahab's house to demand that she hand them over as they were Israelites and thus enemies of no small consequence. But Rahab would not and did not. She fabricated a ruse which, in essence, was lying. In fact, she lied in several ways, intentionally and precisely. How is it, we may ask ourselves, that God would choose to use a liar and a prostitute for his purposes?

As she was a citizen of Jericho one would expect her to 1) do the bidding of her king, and/or 2) side with her city as opposed to the enemy, the Israelites. At this juncture the details of her fabrication are not of interest. We will return to them momentarily. Let us begin with the question of how do we understand her 1) fabrication of the multi-tiered lie and 2) protection of the Israelite spies? Why would she?

1. Rahab knew, that is, was absolutely and utterly convinced, that the LORD had providentially decreed that Israel WOULD conquer the area we refer to as the Promised Land. She was absolutely certain of it.

2. But how did or could she have known? And what else did she know?

3. We are told that a great fear had come over the land, fear that was, evidently, based on the scuttlebutt of an impending invasion. But that raises the question of how could an invasion of such a non-descript and derelict bunch of wandering tribes be such a threat to such a long-settled and secure culture? The twelve tribes were not anywhere close to being a unified nation as they would be under King David many years later. Yet, all the people were "melting in fear."

4. The answer: "We have heard....."

4.A. The citizens of Jericho, and seemingly all the inhabitants of the land, had heard the story, dating some forty years prior, of how the LORD had dried up the Red Sea in the exodus event. [Note: this is evidence that the crossing of the Red Sea was not a "naturalistic" event as some doubters, scholars and lay people alike have tried to make it out to be. Some have posited a very shallow land bridge that suddenly became available for the Israelites to walk across when the waters receded unexpectedly and only briefly.] We need to know that the Canaanites had no warrior gods of their own so they would have understood this God of the Israelites to be a powerful God who contended for his people in such a miraculous manner. Therefore, this God, the LORD, was not a God to contend with, thus, their melting in fear.

4.B. The Jerichoans had also heard the horrifying story of what the Israelites "did to Sihon and Og," the two kingdoms beyond the Transjordan ruled by two kings of the Amorites. The Israelites utterly and totally destroyed them. This historical fact ramped up the idea that this supposedly non-descript rabble was a force not to be taken lightly.

5. This, in its totality and/or by virtue of any or all of its individual parts was such that "when we heard of it our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the LORD your God IS [emphasis mine] God in heaven above and on earth below." These two emphases seem to point to the miraculous in the miracle at the Red Sea and the ordinary work of God in the human agency at Sihon and Og.

6. Thus, Rahab was between a rock and a hard place. She knew with absolute certainty what was coming - an invasion that would be successful. The arrival of the two Israelite spies created a very real dilemma for her - be on the side of the LORD God or work against what would ultimately prevail. If she aided the two spies she might die as a treasonous traitor. But if she exposes them and hands them over to the king's emissaries, she will die along with the citizens of

Jericho. Does she work against her own city who would see her as a traitor and see to her execution, or work against the LORD and the divine plan which would prevail? To choose wrongly would, in one sense, seem to be a suicide mission. All this being said, the choice was perfectly clear.

7. But how to protect the spies and guarantee a future for yourself and your family when that seemed like such a suicide mission.

8. The Canaanites came to the point of "terrified panic" which explains the king's strenuous effort to locate and arrest the two spies. This suggests a few words about Sihon and Og are in order.

9. From Numbers 21:21-35, 32:33, 1 Kings 4:29, and Psalm 136:19-20 we know that, as inferred above, both kings, their kingdoms, and their armies were utterly defeated and destroyed and then carved up and distributed to the Gadites, Reubenites, and half tribe of Manasseh.

10. This history was not lost on the Canaanites. As it occurred not very far east of their location; the story and remembrance was up close and very real.

11. In that this non-descript band of vagabonds and marauders so handily and decisively defeated 2 strong and sound nations, it could only happen by miracle, by divine intervention.

12. Divine miracles and intervention, to say it mildly, were far more seriously understood and believed than in our day, at least over all. This resulted in the popular panic and utter despair that over took the whole population. They sensed and experienced the utter despair from knowledge of immanent doom.

13. Rahab, however surprisingly or not, pays the God of Israel high honor in her siding with the spies and in her obedience to God's obvious plan, a deity worthy of her recognition, obedient response and perhaps even worship in the future.

14. The text doesn't in any way say so or suggest it but if all the foregoing analysis and points are true, after the invasion and take over is complete the Canaanite religion will be non-existent or such that there will be no reason to cling to it. Worship of the LORD will replace it. She instinctively if not rationally knows there is little choice but to get on board, NOW!

15. Yet, she doesn't display anything of this last perhaps pessimistic, less-than-enthusiastic rationale, but seems to sincerely and authentically embrace the LORD and what WILL come. She seems to be 100% on board.

16. The spies, for their part, find themselves in a pickle. They have been found out and spotted going into Rahab's home. This has been reported to the king whereupon he dispatches an arrest squad to the location of their last known whereabouts.

17. It is a Canaanite female prostitute who saves them.

18. Yet, Rahab concedes her powerlessness, in one sense, in things to come, for she asks for an agreement and promise of safety for herself and her family, a promise sealed by an oath she seems to instinctively know the Israelites won't violate. One might rightfully assume she believes this due to their well-known, albeit imperfect, adherence to Yahweh and the sovereignty assigned to him.

19. Rahab, a Canaanite, affirms the sovereignty of Yahweh and accepts his plans and purposes.

20. There is a reciprocal kindness here between Rahab and the spies: her kindness for theirs and vice versa. Both are in a bad/tight spot. They need each other.

21. In the end, the spies and Rahab have to work together for the success of both.

22. Rahab surrendered to the LORD and his unfolding plan. Her choice contrasts that of all the kings of the lands on both sides of the Jordan. She escapes death by siding/identifying with the LORD.

23. A key lesson: Any non-Israelite may come to the LORD and be one of the victors by submitting to and aligning with the one true God. In application, any non-Christian, regardless of ethnicity or origin can come to Jesus Christ for safety and salvation by submitting to and aligning with him in faith and obedience.

24. The issue of lying. There is no doubt that Rahab intentionally, specifically, and with great cunning lied and fabricated. One surely wonders how or why God would use such a person for such a high purpose. Does God not care about the moral character of those he puts into his employ? I believe the best recourse is to refrain from speculation but lean on what the Scriptures seem to say or not say. Most important of all, the Scriptures here and elsewhere neither defend nor condemn her lying and fabrication. The Bible seems to be utterly silent on that matter. Perhaps it is best to let it remain unspoken to other than, if we were after all to use the Scriptures as a guide, all lying is wrong. Perhaps this is why the issue is not addressed in the present passage - it is addressed more than adequately elsewhere.

25. The issue of Rahab being a "prostitute." First, there is no doubt that she was one. Second, and similar to 24 above, the Bible neither condemns nor condones her, shall we say, "chosen vocation". In fact, contrary to what some commentaries (via their authors) attempt to claim, the "sexuality" element does not come into play in the story and text. Sadly, perhaps in the mind set and belief that "sex sells", some authors attempt to claim and even demonstrate that it was possible, perhaps even likely, that the two spies actually had a sexual encounter with Rahab. No such thing is specified or suggested. This is a caution to stick to what is said and not resort to playing word or grammatical games with God's specific word as some have done.

Some concluding thoughts. It is clear that God will not be bound by our expectations of who, what, when, and where God will choose people for his specific purposes, salvific or otherwise. It may surprise us to realize that while we say we believe in God's full and perfect sovereignty we are nonetheless either surprised or perhaps baffled by God's surprising choices. Cyrus is one such instance with Rahab being another. It is at least a little baffling that God would choose a person of questionable vocations and personal ethics and morality. A lying prostitute who is a Canaanite is used by God in the conquest of the Promised Land? Yet, lest we be the ones to cast the first Biblical stone let us remember that we ourselves are not as white and clean as the proverbial driven

snow. Romans 3:23 reminds us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

We must also bear in mind that Rahab saw the writing on the wall, as the adage goes. Weighing all the options, observing the historically revealed truth about God, his will, plan, and sovereignty, she submitted to it and came, seemingly, fully on board. It was a high risk decision, in one sense. At the very least if she was wrong she would have earned the scorn and derision of her own people. It is the same for some people in our day. To come on board with Jesus is in some instances to earn the scorn and derision of one's own family, fellow workers, or culture. In much the same way that Rahab risked physical death by her decision, we understand that what is risked in terms of following or rejecting Jesus is spiritual death.

We also should note, and learn well, that Rahab stands figuratively for all those who begin life outside the known people of God but who became an adherent - an Israelite of sort not by birth but by submission and adherence to God's plan and purposes. No one, we might rightly speculate, would have guessed Rahab would have come to the conclusion, decision, and good end that she did. We, in our day, surely do not know who or which present "non-believers" in our day will become believers in Jesus. This is known only to God. Therefore, should we continue to tell the marvelous, even miraculous, story of Jesus? Just as in Rahab's very own words, "We have heard how the LORD....", wouldn't it be marvelous to hear folks in our own day confess, "We have heard how the Lord Jesus....."?

And lastly, for now at least, let us remember once again that Rahab risked being seen as a treasonous traitor by her culture. This is often the case in our day when people risk becoming disciples of Jesus. Thus, let us pray for those who hear the message of Jesus Christ and considering becoming a committed disciple. Our Gospel lesson I will leave for the reader to consider personally. Mary and her story of anointing Jesus feet is such a compelling and beautiful example of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. It also demonstrates that she knew something significant of the cost to Jesus. "And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." Praise be to God!

From my heart to yours.....