

Old Testament Background: Joshua 2:1 – 21; 6:22 – 25

The Character of Rahab

- **She was a pagan.** She belonged to those people who dwelt in Canaan. She is described in both the Old and New Testaments with the descriptive “harlot,” a term we have come to understand as defining a woman of ill-repute, a prostitute.

Does the word “harlot” in ancient times mean what we understand it to mean in modern times?

- Joshua 2:1 – The spies “went, and came into **an harlot's house** and lodged there.”

The Hebrew word for “harlot” is *zānâ*. The word occurs 93 times in the Old Testament. In every instance where it is used, it refers to illicit heterosexual sex (*harlot, whore, whoring, whoredom*) or metaphorically to the nation of Israel having “religious intercourse” with the false gods of other nations.

Jewish scholars of the Targum and Torah (as well as the historian Josephus) argue that in the Rahab narrative in the Book of Joshua, the Hebrew word used to describe Rahab is not *zānâ* but *zûn*, a word that means “to feed,” or “to provide for” on which they base their interpretation that Rahab was in actuality an innkeeper that lodged travelers or strangers. The context of Joshua 2 SEEMS to support this interpretation given that the king of Jericho knows that any newcomers to Jericho would be lodging at Rahab's house (Joshua 2:3).

But the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* makes it clear that there is zero support for using the word *zûn* and not *zānâ* in the Rahab narrative. In other words, the scholars appear to have arbitrarily changed the Hebrew word to fit their prejudicial interpretation.

- **She was (possibly) a pagan priestess (of sorts)**

- “Harlot” in ancient times had religious implications – not simply illicit sexual activity. The term relates to the fertility cults which prevailed in pagan cultures in which Rahab was immersed. Rahab is not running a “brothel” as we understand it. She would have been a respectable member of the Canaanite community as a woman who facilitated the practice of the fertility cult, the main objective of which was the fulfillment of sexual desire as a kind of “offering” to the pagan gods. In this sense, **Rahab was a (false, pagan) priestess.**
- The king of Jericho **presumes** the strangers would go to Rahab's house, not merely to lodge there, but because (according to his pagan logic) the men would want to appease the gods to gain advantage in their espionage, which of course was not the intent of the two spies. The two spies went there not to engage in pagan religious practices, but to “blend in” with the other strangers in Jericho.
- As a pagan, Rahab would have had **no consciousness of sin** as defined as the transgression of God's law, and **no consciousness of holiness** as defined by the character/attributes of God.

The Nature of Rahab's Faith

- *Distinctive from “them that believed not.”*

This is a theme the writer to the Hebrews used in **3:7 – 4:11** when he put forward the unbelieving Israelites in the wilderness generation, characterized by:

- “an evil heart of unbelief” 3:12
- “them that believed not” 3: 18
- “unbelief” 3:19
- “the word preached not being mixed with faith” 4:2
- “entered not in because of unbelief” 4:6
- “the same example of unbelief” 4:11

What is it that must be believed? The word of God: 4:2, 12

- She **believed** the word of God which, apparently, everyone in Jericho had heard: Joshua 2:9 – 10

Rahab's Word to the Spies:

- “The Lord hath given you the land”
- “Your terror is fallen upon us”
- “All the inhabitants of the land faint because of you”
- “**We** have heard how the Lord dried up the Red sea for you”
- “The Lord your God, he is God in heaven above and earth beneath”

Moses's Song of Praise Exodus 15:11 – 19

- “Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance”
- “The people (pagan nations) shall hear and be afraid”
- “The inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away”
- “Fear and dread shall fall upon them”
- “The children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea”
- “Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods?”

- She **acted** by faith in the word of God “*when she had received the spies with peace.*” The word *peace* is covenantal language and has reference to the covenant the spies entered into with Rahab in promising to spare her and her family from perishing with the inhabitants of Jericho. Compare Heb 8:8 – 13.
- Her faith was **rewarded** (Hebrews 11:6) when the promise of the spies to her was kept and she and her family “*perished not with them that believed not*” (Hebrews 11:31; Joshua 2:12-14; 6:17, 22-23).
- She **identified** with the people of God, forsaking her own people, customs, and religion. She did so at the risk of her life and the life of her family: “*she dwells in Israel unto this day*” (Joshua 6:25), an example to these Jewish Christians to “hold fast the profession of our faith” (3:14; 6:11; 10:23,35).

Why Include Rahab in Hebrews 11?

- Because of her place in the line of David and Christ: she is the mother of Boaz, the great-grandfather of David by Ruth 4:18-22; Matthew 1:5)
- As an example to these 1st century Jewish believers that by faith Rahab forsook her former life, endured the ostracizing of her own people, to identify with the One true and living God and His people (compare Ruth in Ruth 1:16), which was only possible by faith: “the just *shall live* by faith.”