


Identity and Otherness in the Rahab Story: Analysis of the Rahab Speech (Josh 2:9–11)

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ABSTRACT: The biblical story of Rahab of Jericho was included in the Book of Joshua to serve a specific purpose in a remote historical context. This article focuses on a possible function of the Rahab story, which might have been employed by the author/redactor as a literary pattern for cross-cultural encounters between different groups, such as the Canaanite clan of Rahab and the Israelites. The Deuteronomistic Law demands the removal of “others” and separation from them, while Rahab, “the outsider,” is saved and protected by the Israelites. This fact may not only prove the benevolence of the Israelites but also be evidence of a recurring literary pattern of constructing national and religious self-identity first through retelling and eventually rewriting stories. Since the Rahab story has been read/heard by ancient audiences and by many readers through the centuries, this pattern may also prove relevant for contemporary readers by providing grounds for intercultural dialogue in the modern world.

KEYWORDS: Deuteronomistic History, Book of Joshua, Rahab of Jericho, otherness in the Bible, biblical storytelling

In Hebrew tradition, the Book of Joshua is part of the second main section of the Tanakh called *Nevi'im* (Prophets). In the Christian Canon, it also opens, after the Pentateuch, the second main section: the Historical Books. The importance of the Book of Joshua arises from the fact that it provides an account of the conquest of Canaan. One of the fundamental events in this conquest was the capture of Jericho and the role of the prostitute Rahab in achieving this goal (Josh 2:1–24; 6:17, 22–23, 25). Hence, the Book of Joshua provides a broader literary context for the Rahab story. Rahab’s speech relaying Israel’s story to the spies on the roof of her house constitutes the salient point of the story itself.

This study examines the relationship between the biblical text, specifically the Rahab speech to the Israelite spies (Josh 2:9–11), and the readers. Although some allusions will be made to the immediate and broader context of the story, they will not be methodologically analysed as Rahab’s speech to the spies on the roof of her house for two reasons. Firstly, such a study would go far beyond the limits of one article. Secondly, and most importantly, Josh 2:9–11 is the climax of the story that reveals an important thread of the Rahab story, namely “the power of storytelling,” which will be the leading argument in supporting the main idea of this study.

The communication paradigm has been chosen as the hermeneutical approach in analysing this story.¹ In short, the communication paradigm presupposes the necessity of three essential components in the interpretation, which may be roughly labelled as the author, the text, and the reader. Consequently, this approach allows focusing on both the internal literary analysis of the sample text and the external historical analysis (reception history), which registers the readers' interaction with this text.²

1. Audience or Audiences?

The question of the audience for an ancient text is highly complex and problematic and, in the case of Rahab's story, continues to be a matter of conjecture. Certainly, each text is created or edited to assist a specific audience. However, that audience passes away over time, while the texts continue to influence subsequent generations.³ Despite the constant efforts of biblical scholars, the origins of the Rahab story remain unclear and complex. For example, Gene M. Tucker suggests at least three stages in the editorial process: (1) a popular profane story (2) was transformed by a cult tradition of the conquest (cf. Josh 6) and then (3) adopted by the Deuteronomist as a vehicle for his theological principles.⁴ On the other hand, Thomas C. Römer believes the Rahab story is one of the post-Deuteronomistic additions, which was inserted "to counter the Deuteronomistic ideology of segregation."⁵ Regardless of the scenario one accepts, it is indisputable that the story has undergone several re-adaptations to new contexts and demands. This process would inevitably take a long time, perhaps from pre-exilic times, through the exilic, and into the post-exilic (Persian) period.

Moreover, the investigation of the origins of the Rahab story confronts the reader with the editorial process, involving the re-elaboration(s) and the adaptation of the pre-existing form, be it a popular tale or an aetiological saga, to a new target. This creative process takes the actual story out of the standard pattern and presupposes various socio-historical

1 For example, see J.K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication. Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2007); P.L. Danove, *The End of Mark's Story. A Methodological Study* (BibInt 3; Leiden: Brill 1993).

2 My ongoing research on this topic builds upon his proposals in previous publications, such as A. Toczyski, *The 'Geometrics' of The Rahab Story. A Multi-Dimensional Analysis of Joshua 2* (LHBOTS 664; London: Clark 2018); A. Toczyski, "Rahab of Jericho: The Power of Storytelling," *The Bible and Interpretation. News and Interpretations on the Bible and Ancient Near East History* (2018) <https://bibleinterp.arizona.edu/articles/2018/07/toc428017> [access: 22.07.2018].

3 Cf. T.R. Elßner, *Josua und seine Kriege in jüdischer und christlicher Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Theologie und Frieden 37; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2008).

4 Cf. G.M. Tucker, "The Rahab Saga (Joshua 2): Some Form-Critical and Tradition-Historical Observations," *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays. Studies in Honor of William Franklin Stinespring* (ed. J.M. Efrid) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1972) 70.

5 Cf. T.C. Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History. A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: Clark 2007) 134, n. 54, 182.

contexts, as Trent C. Butler explains: “The growth of the story represents a manifold theological interpretation. Each generation of Israelites has learned something new about itself and its God through telling and retelling the story of Jericho’s favourite prostitute.”⁶

Given such modest evidence about the story’s origin, the author would like to pose the following questions: What might the author/redactor wish to convey to his community by embedding the Deuteronomistic tradition into a profane story of a local prostitute from Jericho? And how can contemporary readers engage with this story?

2. Rahab: Insider or Outsider?

Before focusing on the story, we must examine its literary and canonical context. The broader literary context of the Rahab story makes it possible to note a disturbing tension: the survival of foreigners such as Rahab and the Gibeonites (cf. Josh 9:3–16) despite the Deuteronomistic ban. In short, the question is why Rahab and the Gibeonites were allowed to live among the Israelites, contradicting the command of *hērem* clearly expressed in, for example, Deut 7:2; 20:16–17 and Josh 6:17–18. This contrast is rendered even more explicit by the story of an Israelite named Achan, to whom the law was strictly applied (cf. Josh 7:1–26). In fact, the comparison of Rahab’s and Achan’s stories illustrates the process by which Rahab (an outsider) became an insider while Achan (an insider) became an outsider. In the context of the story alone, the rescue of Rahab can be explained by the proverb *do ut des* (I give so that you might give). However, in the broader context, the reader realises that saving Rahab is against the Deuteronomistic Law. Hence, as rightly noted by Robert M. Polzin, one of the functions of this story could be to open the dialogue towards a new understanding of the Mosaic Law.⁷ Therefore, it is clear that “Rahab is the archetype of the outsider who becomes an insider, and the authors of her story wanted their readers to pay close attention to both her words and her deeds and how she negotiated the terms of her survival.”⁸ That said, it is now time to see how it was crafted by the redactor.

3. *Fides ex Auditu*: Rahab’s Confession

In narrative theory, a literary device that includes a story within a story is called embedding. In Joshua 2, the embedded story is at the peak of the unit, commonly referred to as Rahab’s profession of faith (cf. Josh 2:9–11).

6 T.C. Butler, *Joshua* (WBC 7; Waco, TX: Word Books 1983) 34.

7 Cf. R.M. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist. A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History*. I. *Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (New York: Seabury Press 1980) 84–91.

8 J.L. Wright, *War, Memory, and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020) 108–109.

The Rahab story is arranged into ten dialogue-based scenes of varied lengths, joined by narrative sections and introductory formulas. The narrative sections, however, are important only in that they move the plot forward, while the dialogue scenes invite the readers to pause and ponder the main conflicts in the story. The climax of the unit, Rahab's speech, in the form of a short monologue, reveals her deepest motivations and explains her subsequent endeavours. On the roof of the prostitute's house, two sleepy scouts could expect many surprises, but probably not the professing of their most cherished religious beliefs by a prostitute. Thus, what is the function of Rahab's profession in the story as a whole?

First and foremost, Rahab's speech sheds light on her previous, unexpected decision to hide two enemy scouts and possibly incur the wrath of the king and citizens of Jericho. In literary terms, it is the climax and turning point of the entire story and the start of a series of resolutions. At this point, it also becomes clear that Rahab was motivated not by speechless and passive spies but by the story of the mighty deeds of the Israelite God, about which all citizens of Jericho had somehow heard. This story allowed her to make a key decision, which later became a platform for further negotiations leading to the alliance with the Israelites. At this point, it is useful to note the well-constructed structure of Rahab's confession (Josh 2:9–11) beginning with the introductory formula (v. 9a), which presents a concentric arrangement of information as A–B–C–D–C'–B'–A'.

A:	I know: that the Lord has given you the land, (v. 9b)	יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־נָתַן יְהוָה לָכֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ
B:	and that your terror has fallen on us, (v. 9c)	וְכִי־נִפְלָה אִימַתְכֶם עָלֵינוּ
C:	and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. (v. 9d)	וְכִי נִמְגּוּ כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם
D:	For we have heard the fact that the Lord dried up the water of the Sea of Reeds before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, namely that you utterly destroyed them. (v. 10)	כִּי שָׁמַעְנוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר־הוֹבִישׁ יְהוָה אֶת־מֵי יַם־סוּף מִפְּנֵיכֶם בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם וְאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם לְשְׁנֵי מְלָכֵי הָאֲמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן לְסִיחֹן וְלֹעֹג אֲשֶׁר הִחָרַמְתֶּם אוֹתָם
C':	and when we heard it our hearts melted, (v. 11a)	וּבְשָׁמַע וַיִּמְסוּ לִבֵּנוּ
B':	and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, (v. 11b)	וְלֹא־קָמָה עוֹד רוּחַ בְּאִישׁ מִפְּנֵיכֶם
A':	because as for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth below. ⁹ (v. 11c)	כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת

9 The English translation is from: Toczyski, *The 'Geometrics' of The Rahab Story*, 51–52.

The entire speech is in the central part of the chapter, which sheds light on Rahab's motivation and further requests. First, she is shown to be profoundly engaged by the story that will soon change her life. The above structure shows that her arguments derive from personal deliberation: A) "I know" → A') "the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth below." Therefore, the praise of the Israelite God seems to derive from her personal reflections on life in light of the story she has heard. Her personal deliberation is also highlighted by personal pronouns: "We have heard" but "I know." Above all, it is important to reiterate that at the heart of Rahab's allocution is a reference to the story/rumour that had a devastating impact on the morale of the people, starting with the king. On first reading, it seems a simple story, a retelling of the two most glorious events of the Israelite past: the Crossing of the Sea and the defeat of the Amorite kings. However, as John L. McKenzie argues: "Rahab is quoted as being rather well read in the Deuteronomistic tradition of the Exodus and the wilderness."¹⁰ And Yair Zakovitch astutely notes that "Rahab's words reveal that she, a small-time prostitute from Jericho, knows better than Joshua how great and powerful is Yahweh, the God of Israel."¹¹ Hence, Rahab's recollection of these memories, couched in a solemn Deuteronomistic style, creates a certain degree of irony. The Canaanite woman and prostitute invites the chosen people of God to remember and learn about the God who revealed himself in their past. Many perceive this as a powerful metaphor for Israel itself. According to William L. Moran, "One may ask if the image does not go still deeper, and functioning as a symbol of Israel suggests the deepest truth of the Conquest ahead: the people so passive, contributing so little, achieving what it does only through the intervention and protection of the God of the exodus, be it found in a spectacular crumbling of walls or in the quiet miracle of a Rahab's faith."¹²

Consequently, Rahab's confession results in a treaty with the spies.¹³ The particle עתה "now then" (v. 12a) highlights a necessary connection between her previous action in favour of the spies and her present request of an oath from them: הַשְּׂבוּ עָמָּי לִי "now swear to me" (v. 12a). Rahab's request marks the turning point of the narrative. Thereafter, the story (vv. 12–24) depicts a detailed negotiation between her and the spies, which eventually results in an oath between them ensuring the protection of Rahab and her family.¹⁴

¹⁰ J.L. McKenzie, *The World of the Judges* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1966) 48.

¹¹ Y. Zakovitch, "Humor and Theology or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Literary Folkloric Approach to Joshua 2," *Text and Tradition. The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (ed. S. Niditch) (SemeiaSt; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press 1990) 90.

¹² W.L. Moran, "The Repose of Rahab's Israelite Guests," *Studi sull'Oriente e La Bibbia offerti al P. Giovanni Rinaldi nel 60° Compleanno da Allievi, Colleghi, Amici* (ed. G. Buccellati) (Genova: Studio e Vita 1967) 284.

¹³ On the covenant form of Josh 2:9–21, see K.M. Campbell, "Rahab's Covenant: A Short Note on Joshua II 9–21," *VT* 22/2 (1972) 243–244.

¹⁴ According to Josh 6:22–23, they were saved but placed outside the camp of Israel. As Péter Jenői ("Strategies for Stranger Inclusion in The Narrative Traditions of Joshua–Judges: The Cases of Rahab's Household, the Kenites and the Gibeonites," *OTE* 32/1 [2019] 138) explains: "This liminal position could be understood as a temporal asylum-status... Instead of the standard verb גור, the text uses שָׁב to describe Rahab's dwelling in Israel. However, שָׁב is a supporting and substituting verb in the OT narratives to denote the phenomena of sojourning and being a resident in the midst of another community."

Incidentally, the inclusion of others is an ongoing motif in the Bible. It suffices to recall Ruth, a Moabite who becomes an “insider” despite the law expressed in Deut 23:3, but also Tamar (Gen 38:1–30) or Hagar (Gen 16:1–14). Interestingly, in Matthew’s genealogy, Rahab becomes Ruth’s mother-in-law (cf. Matt 1:5).¹⁵

Thus, what is the function of the Rahab story, especially her confession, in the conquest narrative of the Book of Joshua? Undoubtedly, Rahab’s words and actions foreshadow the outcomes of the conquest of the Land. The spies come and meet Rahab, from whom they learn that the Land lies open before them. As a result, Carey Walsh argues: “She is acclaimed in Israel’s memory as foundational to the nation. Rahab, the triple Other to her own people, then becomes a remembered hero of another people, Israel, the outsiders to this Promised Land.”¹⁶ However, there is another side to and function of this story. Perhaps the true purpose of employing the perspective of an undesirable “other” was also to challenge the internal struggles of the community to whom the story was addressed initially. It is entirely plausible that the redactor consciously used the story of the undesirable “other” to address several issues concerning his audience/community. This somehow mirrors the praxis of Herodotus, who was less interested in conveying information about “others” (barbarians) than in using their stories “because they provide a means of thinking about Greek identity.”¹⁷ Because the Deuteronomistic Law demanded the removal of “others” to ensure total separateness, introducing Rahab—the outsider—who is praising the God of Israel, was clearly meant to challenge the ideology of segregation and national exclusivity.¹⁸

Furthermore, the resolute portrayal of a woman as an external critic of internal values and practices must have been challenging for the patriarchal community. As a woman, Canaanite, and prostitute, Rahab was ostensibly powerless in the face of the male-dominated laws and customs of the Israelites. Yet, she demonstrated a new dimension of femininity: one that was not only strong and self-confident but, in a certain sense, also “prophetic” in that she could hear, understand, and re-interpret her social standing in a turbulent new world. Jacob L. Wright argues that “Her actions presage the hope that inspires the prophets, who respond to the devastation of their societies by discerning a new dawn on the horizon.”¹⁹

Thus, the story of Rahab tells the reader as much about the Israelites as about Rahab herself. Including Rahab’s story in the Book of Joshua, therefore, provides a glimpse into some internal struggles of the community. Presenting their culture and religion as superior was not unusual in such a remote context. On the other hand, the Rahab story exposes

15 L.D. Hawk, *Joshua in 3-D. A Commentary on Biblical Conquest and Manifest Destiny* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Book, 2010) 323–333.

16 C. Walsh, “Women on the Edge,” *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period* (eds. E. Ben Zvi – D.V. Edelman) (LHBOTS 456; London: Clark 2016) 130.

17 K. Vlassopoulos, “The Stories of the Others: Storytelling and Intercultural Communication in the Herodotean Mediterranean,” *Ancient Ethnography. New Approaches* (eds. E. Almagor – J. Skinner) (London – New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2013) 49.

18 Cf. Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History*, 134, n. 54, 182.

19 Wright, *War, Memory, and National Identity in the Hebrew Bible*, 108.

not only the submissive character of the outsider but also the problematic character of Israelite customs (e.g. the “ban”) and perhaps even their insecurity in a multicultural world. In other words, the Rahab story also ridicules the Israelites when it portrays the supposedly skilled male spies as puppets in the hands of a Canaanite harlot. In fact, it is worth noting that in the Rahab story, the outsider’s perspective was used not only to taunt others or display them as inferior but as an external critique of several practices and weaknesses of their community. The awareness of such structural complexity within the story may offer to any reader (also to present-day communities) a powerful image for cross-cultural conversations in which one’s values are reviewed from an outsider’s perspective.

The author/redactor uses the story of a despised outcast to provide an internal critique. In this way, the Rahab story appears to be a “creative oxymoron” which portrays a collision of opposites forced to engage in dialogue to coexist. When people enter into alliances, they usually need to negotiate agreements, which inevitably lead to compromises (cf. Josh 2:12–21). Consequently, the Rahab story has become a broad, open space for a universal conversation that leads to many new and fresh interpretations. Interestingly enough, the meaning of Rahab’s name (רַחַב) implies a “wide” and “opened” space.²⁰ Thus, her name, together with her profession, is clearly endowed with sexual connotation and may be perceived as an “ironic provocation.”²¹ Hence, as it was for Israelites in the Persian Imperium, it is a provocative oxymoron which directly addresses individuals and communities, presenting them with many questions. Considering all the socio-cultural aspects of that conversation, it is crucial to remember the most important question asked by Rahab is: how do I/we relate to the Lord our God, who is God in Heaven above and on earth below?

Conclusion

In sum, this paper argues that the relevance of Rahab’s story consists not only in foreshadowing the outcomes of the conquest of the Promised Land but also in challenging the theology of national exclusivity, providing a glimpse into some internal struggles of the community, which had to learn something new about their God and their sacred traditions in a turbulent world. In this way, the Rahab story became a means that helped Israelites examine their enduring values and customs in a world where ethnic encounters with others were not only inevitable but also necessary. The fact that the Israelites incorporated a story that challenged their laws into their traditional collections urges all its readers to examine their attitude towards others. As L. Daniel Hawk rightly points out: “the biblical text ... prods today’s Christian readers to examine their own attitudes and perspectives. Who are the ‘others’ in our thinking? What stereotypes do we hold? What demanding attitudes and

²⁰ See “רַחַב,” *HALOT* III, 1210–1211.

²¹ Cf. N. Winther-Nielsen, *A Functional Discourse Grammar of Joshua. A Computer Assisted Rhetorical Structure Analysis* (ConBOT 40; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 1995) 117, n. 13.

perceptions should be disposed and discarded? Are we willing to make space for others in our hearts and in our churches?"²² The present author could not agree more with his assertion.

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22 Hawk, *Joshua in 3-D*, 36.

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