

RAHAB THE RIGHTEOUS?

Rahab, whose story is recorded in Joshua 2 & 6:22-25, is one of the more well known “others” in the Bible. A citizen of the city of Jericho, she was a prostitute by trade and one of the most unlikely persons ever to be honored throughout scripture. Upon her introduction in the biblical narrative, calling her righteous would be scandalous, yet here is how history remembers her:

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? (James 2:25)

Like most of “the others” who played significant roles throughout the Bible, her story is quite interesting.

Rahab the Prostitute

There has been in the past a great effort made by both Jewish and Christian theologians to reinvent Rahab—claiming ambiguity in the language to portray her as an innkeeper. After all it is indeed scandalous to see a harlot’s name appear in the genealogy of Christ (see Matthew 1:5). So at one point the attempt was made to sanitize her reputation. But there is no mistake, she was what the text claims—a prostitute.

She lived within the city walls, that is, her home was inside of the walls itself, apparently at the top of the wall, since her roof becomes a part of her story. Her window (also a part of the story) looked directly outside of the city. This positioning worked both in her favor (as the narrative unfolds), but also offered others easy access (which would benefit her trade) as the spies were spotted as they entered in.

The events surrounding Rahab came to visit her in the form of the two Hebrew spies Joshua sent to recon Jericho. This was during the timeframe of Israel’s march to take possession of Canaan. Rahab—as well as all of Jericho—was aware of Israel and how they had blitzed their way through other tribes and peoples on their journey. She was afraid. All of Jericho was afraid too, that the same fate awaited them (it did, of course).

How the spies ended up in her home is not known—perhaps it was the easy access. Perhaps there was much more to the story than we know, but there they were and there they hid as Jericho’s king got wind of their presence sending a message to Rahab about them. This is where the story takes a turn and Rahab the prostitute begins her evolution to Rahab the righteous.

The Other’s Faith

Instead of turning over the spies to the king, she hid them on her roof under stalks of flax (a plant used to make linen). When the king’s men came looking, she redirected them to protect the spies. Basically, she risked everything for these foreign invaders. Why? Faith in their God! She makes two powerful faith statements to the spies:

I know that the Lord has given this land to you... (2:9)

For the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below. (2:11)

These were quite remarkable statements coming from this Canaanite woman. It does open up the discussion of was there something more going on here? As an other, how did she come to this kind of faith? Certainly the Hebrew's reputation preceded them as she acknowledges in the story, but her faith seems to be deeper than just hearsay about another god. Some speculate that she—knowing what was coming—was negotiating out of self-interest (the oath to save her and her family). Could it be possible, however, that God had already identified her and revealed himself to her in some way? Why did the spies pick out her house? Was God's hand in this in some way unseen in the text? It would be most like him to use someone so unexpected, but someone apparently with a heart open to faith (think about this—two other women in the lineage of Jesus also were scandalized because of sexual misdeeds—Tamar in Genesis 38 and Bathsheba in 2 Kings 11). We may never know.

What we do know is that after hiding and protecting the spies, they were able to escape. They promised to remember and rescue Rahab along with her entire family for saving them. She was to hang a red cord out of the same window the spies used to escape. Upon Israel's coming invasion—if they remained in that house they would be spared. They did and they were. As the walls came tumbling down Joshua instructed the two men to bring them out.

Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day. (6:25)

The other becomes a part of Israel and not just a part, but also a vital part of their history and of Christian teaching as well. For Rahab eventually married a Hebrew named Salmon. They had a son, Boaz, who famously also married an "other" (See Matthew 1:5 again). Down the line a bit, their ancestor Joseph married Mary who gave birth to another son...

So then the Hebrew writer would later add Rahab's name to a rather stellar list of folks:

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient. (Hebrews 11:31)

Not bad for a harlot of Canaan—an Other whose faith in the one true God still stands as a living testament of what faith should be.

Rahab's Legacy

Obviously she symbolizes how God can use anyone—regardless—if they open their hearts to him. No one—no "other"—is outside of his reach of grace and mercy. Israel embracing her sets an example for the church to embrace the others around us. The fact that she is included in both the genealogy of Christ and in the faith hall of fame indicates how God always had in mind inclusion of the others, in elevating them by giving them equal and full access to his blessings and promises in Abraham and in Christ. Her legacy is an incredible one—one that should be an encouragement to us all.