

Between Faith and Works

Rahab has a long and complex afterlife in the history of biblical interpretation. For the rabbis, she represents the prototypical “righteous proselyte” who, despite her Canaanite descent and fame as a *fille de joie*, becomes a full member of Israel. For the first Christian interpreters, her story illustrates foundational theological principles, such as the relationship between faith and works.

These differing approaches reflect an abiding tension between Christian and Jewish approaches to the Bible, both ancient and modern. Because that tension bears directly on our central concern with “war and national identity,” we will compare a number of early readings of the biblical account. In doing so, we will deepen our appreciation of the ideals, ethos, and concerns that shaped biblical war commemoration as a politico-theological discourse, as well as the competing understandings of “belonging” in early Jewish and Christian communities.

THREE EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETERS

Next to Joshua, who was seen as a prefiguration of Jesus, Rahab stands out as one of the leading biblical personalities in the imagination of early Christian interpreters.³ The Gospel of Matthew even identifies her as an ancestress of Jesus. A gentile saved from the divine judgment poured out on a pagan city, she embodies central themes in the theology of the early church.

³ On Joshua in the early Christian imagination, see Zev Farber, *Images of Joshua in the Bible and Their Reception* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

Recently, a number of biblical scholars have ended this long-standing veneration of Rahab. Viewing her now as a *collaboratrice* who joins forces with colonizers, these scholars consciously adopt the perspective of indigenous peoples – in Palestine, New Zealand, South Africa, North America, and other places. For example, Lori Rowlett compares the biblical account to Disney’s *Pocahontas* and subjects it to a penetrating postcolonial critique.⁴

Rahab’s recent ill repute represents, to be sure, a drastic departure from the high honor that she has enjoyed since the emergence of Christianity. To begin this chapter, we examine several of the earliest Christian texts, showing how they interpret Jewish scriptures in line with a new theological program. I have confined the discussion to these works because they are the earliest ones to refer to this biblical figure, they feature numerous points of contact, and they illustrate the potential of biblical war commemoration for Christian theological construction.⁵

⁴ Lori L. Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence: A New Historicist Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Rowlett, “Disney’s Pocahontas and Joshua’s Rahab in Postcolonial Perspective” in George Aichele (ed.), *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 66–75. See also Mitri Raheb, “Jericho zuerst” in Dorothee Sölle (ed.), *Für Gerechtigkeit streiten: Theologie im Alltag einer bedrohten Welt* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1994), 174–179; Viola Raheb, “Ringens mit und um Rahab: Bibelarbeit zu Rahab (Jos 2,1–24; 6,17.22–25)” in Sonja Angelika Strube (ed.), *Fremde Frauen* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2010), 60–67; Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); Dube, “Rahab Says Hello to Judith: A Decolonizing Feminist Reading” in Fernando Segovia (ed.), *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2003), 142–158; Dube, “Rahab is Hanging Out a Red Ribbon: One African Woman’s Perspective on the Future of Feminist New Testament Scholarship” in Kathleen Wicker (ed.), *Feminist New Testament Studies: Global and Future Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 177–202; Judith E. McKinlay, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004), 37–56; Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, “Postcolonial Perspectives on Premonarchic Women” in Robert B. Coote and Norman K. Gottwald (eds.), *To Break Every Yoke: Essays in Honor of Marvin L. Chaney* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 188–199; Marcella M. Althaus-Reid, “Searching for a Queer Sophia-Wisdom: The Post-Colonial Rahab” in Lisa Isherwood (ed.), *Patriarchs, Prophets and Other Villians* (London: Equinox, 2007), 128–140; Suzanne Scholz, “Convert, Prostitute, or Traitor? Rahab as the Anti-Matriarch in Biblical Interpretations” in Mishael Caspi and John Greene (eds.), *In the Arms of Biblical Women* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2013), 153–186.

⁵ See A. T. Hanson, “Rahab the Harlot in Early Christian Tradition,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 1 (1978), 53–60. Evidence of the possible genetic influences includes the emphasis on hospitality or (in 1 Clement and James) the point that Rahab sent the spies in the opposite direction from that of the king’s men.

FIRST EPISTLE OF CLEMENT

Written to the church at Corinth in the wake of a communal crisis, the First Epistle of Clement is one of the earliest Christian writings and is likely older than a number the New Testament books. The lengthy work refers extensively to the Jewish scriptures as it seeks to demonstrate “how from generation to generation the Master hath given a place of repentance unto them that desire to turn to Him” (7:5).⁶ The twelfth chapter rehearses the biblical account of Rahab, quoted here in the elegant translation from 1869 by J. B. Lightfoot:

For her faith and hospitality Rahab the harlot was saved. For when the spies were sent forth unto Jericho by Joshua the son of Nun, the king of the land perceived that they were come to spy out his country, and sent forth men to seize them, that being seized they might be put to death. So the hospitable Rahab received them and hid them in the upper chamber under the flax stalks. And when the messengers of the king came near and said, *The spies of our land entered in unto thee: bring them forth, for the king so ordereth*: then she answered, *The men truly, whom ye seek, entered in unto me, but they departed forthwith and are sojourning on the way*; and she pointed out to them the opposite road. And she said unto the men, *Of a surety I perceive that the Lord your God delivereth this city unto you; for the fear and the dread of you is fallen upon the inhabitants thereof. When therefore it shall come to pass that ye take it, save me and the house of my father. And they said unto her, It shall be even so as thou hast spoken unto us. Whensoever therefore thou perceivest that we are coming, thou shalt gather all thy folk beneath thy roof and they shall be saved; for as many as shall be found without the house shall perish.* And moreover they gave her a sign, that she should hang out from her house a scarlet thread, thereby showing beforehand that through the blood of the Lord there shall be redemption unto all them that believe and hope on God. Ye see, dearly beloved, not only faith, but prophecy, is found in the woman.⁷

While Clement’s rendering hews closely to the original story, it departs from it in several telling ways. His larger purpose is to explain why “Rahab the harlot was saved.” The salvation he envisions, however, is far removed from – and a theologically rarefied form of – the survival of Rahab’s clan among the people of Israel in the territory that they conquer. While Clement begins with the biblical story, he interprets the deliverance in the framework of a distinctively Christian soteriology, which we can observe *in statu nascendi* in the writings of the early church.

⁶ See Donald Alfred Hager, *The Use of the Old and New Testaments in Clement of Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

⁷ J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Clement of Rome* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 60.

Clement begins by declaring that Rahab was saved first by “faith/belief” (*pistis*). While central to Christian writings, a doctrine of salvific faith, as we will see, is foreign to the account in Joshua – both in its older Hebrew form and in the Greek translations undertaken by Jewish scholars in the Greco-Roman period.⁸

But Rahab wasn’t saved by faith alone according to Clement; she had also demonstrated exceptional “love of strangers” (*philoxenia*). The church father is referring here not to Rahab’s profession but to a set of social expectations relating to the treatment of strangers and guests that sociologists study under the rubric of “hospitality.” Practiced widely throughout ancient Mediterranean societies, hospitality is central to the moral vision of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and an important theme of Clement’s Epistle.⁹ When the king of Jericho learns about the spies at Rahab’s home, he sends soldiers to seize and execute them. It’s at this point that “the hospitable Rahab” receives the men and hides them.

The scarlet cord that Rahab displays in her window, in keeping with the spies’ instructions, carries special significance as a prophetic “sign” in Clement’s interpretation. The color signifies “that through the blood of the Lord there shall be redemption unto all them that believe and hope on God.” The reference to “hope” here is noteworthy, as it’s closely related semantically to the Hebrew word for cord (*tiqwāh*). This clue and others suggest that Clement may have been influenced by early Jewish interpretation, and a number of leading nineteenth-century scholars even thought that he was born Jewish.

⁸ On the concept of faith in the early church, and the shift from trust and faithfulness to belief in doctrines, see Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). On a similar move to *fides qua* in medieval Judaism (from “believe in” to “believe that”), see Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel* (New York: Oxford, 1986); Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, 2nd ed. (London: Littman, 2006).

⁹ Thus, Abraham receives a son in his old age as a reward for “his faith and hospitality” (10:7), and Lot is saved from Sodom because he displays “hospitality and godliness” (11:1). Our study of “passages to peace” in Chapter 1 demonstrated how the biblical scribes used hospitality as the basis for negotiating relations with neighboring peoples. The contemporary study of hospitality takes its point of departure from the research of the anthropologist and hispanicist Julian Pitt-Rivers in the mid-twentieth century. On hospitality in the social world of the ancient Mediterranean, see Andrew E. Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

Alongside Clement, two writings from the New Testament construct memories of Rahab to illustrate the efficacy of faith.¹⁰ The eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews includes Rahab in a monumental tribute to prominent figures from the Jewish scriptures who, “by faith” (*pistei*), demonstrated that “God had provided something better for us” (11:40). The intended audience consists of those who “look to Jesus” as “the founder and perfecter of our faith” (12:2). The author declares that “by faith, Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace” (11:31). As in Clement’s letter, faith is tethered to hospitality, even if the term *philoxenia* doesn’t appear here.

In the preceding verse, we are told that “by faith, the walls of Jericho fell after the people marched around them for seven days.” In keeping with the same line of reasoning, Rahab’s reception of the spies testifies to her faith inasmuch as the destruction of Jericho was still a future event. For faith, according to the proem of the pericope, is “the confidence of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1).¹¹

The author of this account commemorates Rahab’s deeds, along with others from Israel’s past, in an effort to show that, despite appearances, all were actually seeking “a heavenly country” or “city that God has prepared for them.” In this way, the author denationalizes Israel’s heroes and transforms them into prototypes of a new transnational “people of God” (11:25). Like so many others, this early Christian writing reorients the thoroughly political complexion of the Jewish scriptures in the direction of a de-territorialized, denationalized, eschatological future. Whereas the book of Joshua depicts a war fought by the people of Israel, whom Rahab joins in solidarity, the book of Hebrews sees in Rahab’s story an anticipation of the impending divine judgment upon the unrighteous. Because of

¹⁰ The two New Testament writings discussed here, along with Clement, espouse ideas on faith that have been controversial in Christian theology (and later esp. in Protestantism) due to their putative proximity to “Jewish works-righteousness.” This fact imparts to them an added value for our study, since even they, as we shall see, are far removed from the political dimensions of the biblical account and Jewish interpretations thereof. For a classic comparison of these three works, see Benjamin W. Bacon, “The Doctrine of Faith in Hebrews, James, and Clement of Rome,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 19 (1900), 12–21.

¹¹ Compare the final lines (regarding hope and Rahab’s prophetic gift) in the text of 1 Clement cited in the preceding section.

her faith, we are told, she did not perish with “those who were disobedient.” What was once national and political is now universal and ethical.

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

The Epistle of James is a sapiential treatise, written in exquisite Greek, that may have been composed for, and circulated among, “Jewish-Christian” communities in Palestine. One section treats the subject of faith, and it uses the example of Rahab to establish the importance of “works” against those who were apparently claiming that faith is all one needs: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. Was not Rahab the harlot justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road?” (2:24–25). As with 1 Clement and Hebrews, this early Christian writing emphasizes Rahab’s hospitality (“she welcomed the messengers”).

That the author appeals to the story of Rahab may be because it had already served as an important proof-text in theological debates. Rahab’s profession of Yhwh’s power is one of the lengthiest and most forceful in the Hebrew Bible, as we will see later in this chapter. By drawing on the account, writers in the early church could buttress a soteriology that prioritized belief and confessions of faith. Perhaps responding to the anti-nomianism inherent in Paul’s theology of faith, the Epistle of James seizes on the account in order to argue, *a fortiori*, that even it attributes Rahab’s rescue to her “works” rather than her bold and elaborate asseveration.

The author of James proceeds to translate these facts into Christian theological categories: “a person is justified by works rather than faith alone.” Belief or creeds are not enough: “You believe that God is one? Good for you! Even the demons believe in fear and trembling” (2:19). This argument comes remarkably close to Rahab’s declaration that “dread of you has fallen on us, and all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you, for we have heard how Yhwh dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds . . .” (Josh. 2:9). As I will show, this declaration is not “a confession of faith,” but rather an acknowledgment of indisputable facts, without any redemptive value in and of itself.

CHRISTIANS AS READERS OF THE JEWISH SCRIPTURES

The Jewish scriptures assumed very different meanings, as they were read and interpreted in communities whose social constitution and collective

concerns differed in many ways from the communities that produced them. In the case of Rahab, writers in the early church pressed her story into the service of sophisticated debates on soteriology. What gets obfuscated in these debates is the extent to which the account in Joshua relates to membership of the political community of Israel.¹²

The Christian writings take for granted that a Canaanite could join the “people of God.” Given the church’s multiethnic constellation, Rahab’s Gentile identity undoubtedly predestined her to a long afterlife in Christian literature.¹³ Yet the three interpreters we looked at are not interested in how this figure, as an archetypal alien, secured membership among the people of Israel by demonstrating allegiance to the nation during a momentous war effort. Instead, they use her story to teach ideals of community (such as hospitality) and to address theological matters (such as sin, divine judgment on the disobedient, justification, and eternal salvation) that transcend national boundaries. Something is thus not only lost but also gained in their adaptation: as these thinkers engaged in their own project of peoplehood, a paradigmatic case of war commemoration from the Jewish scriptures proved to be a powerful theological framework for articulating fundamental doctrines and addressing concerns that faced the church as an emerging *transnational* community of faith.

What I wish to get at in the present study is nothing less than the *raison d’être* of the Jewish scriptures. According to a leading trajectory of critical scholarship, the Hebrew Bible reflects the emergence of a religious or cultic community of “Yahwists” from the ashes of national defeat. Following Wellhausen, many scholars distinguish between a national existence during the time of the monarchy, on one side, and nonnational religious community living under foreign imperial hegemony, on the other (see the Introduction to the present volume). But this division is severely undermined by the evidence that the battlefield persists in the final strata of the Hebrew Bible (in stark contrast to the New Testament) as a preferred narrative space. Memories of war and martial conflict course through the veins of these writings because they are crafted for a community with a political and territorial orientation.

¹² In chapter 11 of *David, King of Israel*, I treat a similar move in the reception history of the figure of Caleb among Christians and Muslims.

¹³ Her identity as a Gentile may have been one of the reasons for her inclusion in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5). The authors seem to have identified these women (Tamar, Ruth, the wife of Uriah, and Rahab) as Gentiles.

Although widely viewed, especially by its Christian interpreters, as scripture for an emerging religious sect, the Hebrew Bible has, I maintain, a much more ambitious agenda, serving as the blueprint for a new kind of nationhood. The New Testament authors adopted and adapted this blueprint in keeping with their own interest in creating a spiritual community of faith. To state the difference simply: The Hebrew Bible is a project of creating one nation, while the New Testament is a project of creating a community whose members hail from all nations. Likewise, the Hebrew Bible is about creating an identity that is capable of withstanding national defeat, while the New Testament is about creating an identity capable of withstanding Jesus's death and delayed return.

The literary corpus we know today as the Hebrew Bible is ultimately a rabbinic project. The Jewish sages from the first centuries of the Common Era were the ones who defined the contours of this corpus by excluding such works as 1 and 2 Maccabees.¹⁴ But even if the rabbis had not played a crucial role in the shaping of the Hebrew scriptures, they stand in more direct continuity than the New Testament writers with the scribes who created this corpus. Admittedly, the destruction of the temple marks a traumatic cultural rupture with which rabbinic Judaism had to come to terms in various ways. Yet this rupture pales in comparison with the radical departure from the Hebrew Bible represented by the worship of Christ. For the early church, the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth constitutes the turning point in history, and the New Testament writings owe their existence in large part to the hermeneutical struggle with the problems, and prospects, presented by this discontinuity with the Jewish scriptures.

JOSEPHUS

A good candidate for comparison with early Christian readers is the *Antiquities* of the Jewish priest, military commander, and historian, Flavius Josephus. His pleonastic retelling of the account, which overlaps on many points with rabbinic interpretations, underscores the political nature of the negotiations between Rahab and the spies.¹⁵

¹⁴ The fundamental way in which 1 Maccabees departs from the ethos articulated in this corpus is treated in Jacob L. Wright, "Making a Name for Oneself: Martial Valor, Heroic Death, and Procreation in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 36 (2011), 131–162.

¹⁵ See Christopher Begg, "The Rahab Story in Josephus," *Liber Annuus*, 55 (2005), 113–130, and the response to Begg's essay by G. J. Swart, "Rahab and Esther in Josephus: An Intertextual Approach," *Acta Patristica and Byzantina*, 17 (2006), 50–65.

Following the lead of the biblical account, Josephus explicitly links Rahab's honored place in Israel to the *memory* of her wartime contributions. In a particularly prolix passage (even by Josephus's standards), Rahab pleads that as soon as the nation conquers the land, the spies *remember* the danger she had undergone for their sakes. If the king had caught her, he would have executed both her and her family. As a reward for her bravery, she demands that they swear to preserve her and her family's lives as soon as they have finished conquering Canaan. The spies agree to reward her "not only in words, but in deeds [*ergoi*]."

But when the tumult was over, Rahab brought the men down, and desired them as soon as they should have obtained possession of the land of Canaan, when it would be in their power to make her amends for her preservation of them, to remember what danger she had undergone for their sakes; for that if she had been caught concealing them, she could not have escaped a terrible destruction, she and all her family with her, and so bid them go home; and desired them to swear to her to preserve her and her family when they should take the city, and destroy all its inhabitants, as they had decreed to do; for so far she said she had been assured by those Divine miracles of which she had been informed. So these spies acknowledged that they owed her thanks for what she had done already, and withal swore to requite her kindness, not only in words, but in deeds.¹⁶

The spies instruct Rahab to keep her family and possessions in her house during the battle, and to mark her residence with scarlet threads so that the soldiers could more easily identify it; if she failed to do so, they would be relieved of their obligations. Later, Joshua communicates to the high priest and senate (*gerousia*) what the spies had sworn to Rahab, and these organs of government in turn officially approve the oath.

Instead of stripping the narrative of its martial materiality and reducing it to an illustration of a timeless theological principle, Josephus preserves its national character. While he shadows the biblical *Vorlage*, he also accentuates its political features. For example, he highlights the formal-legal qualities of the pact and its *quid pro quo* rationale.¹⁷ In recounting the battle of Jericho, he claims that Joshua formally avowed his gratitude to Rahab, granted her landholdings, "and held her in high esteem ever afterwards." These details embellish the biblical depiction and anticipate

¹⁶ Josephus, *Ant.* 5.1.5–15, in the translation by William Whiston (1737).

¹⁷ Here, Josephus seems to have in view a legal question found in later rabbinic interpretation – namely, that Rahab saved only two men but demands that her entire family be rescued, which makes the deal lopsided. In response, Josephus shows that it was a *quid pro quo* arrangement inasmuch as Rahab jeopardized the lives of her entire family, whom the king would have executed along with Rahab.

later rabbinic legends discussed in the following section. The conferral of property rights is, nevertheless, consonant with the biblical authors' concern to show how, after the conquest, Joshua equitably distributed the land among all members of the nation, and what warrants the embellishment is the statement in the biblical account that Rahab "has continued to dwell in the midst of Israel until this day" (Josh. 6:25).

Josephus's rendering of Rahab's eloquent utterance about Israel's god is especially telling. The historian has reduced a speech, which encompasses three long verses in the biblical account, to a brief line that explains Rahab's confidence in Israel's victory: "... for she knew all [what would happen] because she had been instructed by signs [*sēmeiois*] of God." Reminiscent of the claims in later Christian and Jewish literature that Rahab possessed the gift of prophecy, this little statement in Josephus's retelling has fully replaced Rahab's eloquent declaration in the biblical text, with its climactic peroration: "For Yhwh your god, he is god in the heavens above and on the earth below!" (Josh. 2:11).

The fact that Josephus downplays the significance of Rahab's pronouncements about Israel's god, and empties them of any independent merit, is undoubtedly related to the great space he devotes to depicting how this woman risked her life, and that of her entire family, by hiding the spies. What justifies the honored place she and her family enjoy in Israel's national territory and its collective history are not her *words* but rather her *works*.¹⁸

RAHAB AND THE RABBIS

Rabbinic interpretation elicits sympathy for Rahab by maintaining that she had been forced into a life of sex trafficking as a child. The proof for this surprising claim is that she had heard the news about the Egyptians' demise, which happened forty years earlier. At that time, they surmise, she must have been at least ten years of age, and now at fifty, she was still working as a prostitute. She owed her enduring career to her extraordinary beauty. (The rabbis counted her among the four most beautiful women who ever lived, the others being the matriarch Sarah, David's wife Abigail, and Queen Esther.) Rahab's beauty was so legendary that simply repeating her name twice would immediately bring sexual

¹⁸ With respect to the relationship between war commemoration and the theological discourse on faith and works, it's worth noting that the *Iliad* and a host of other Greek texts use the term "works" (*ergoi*) to describe valorous deeds on the battlefield.

release.¹⁹ The spies seek her out because her fame had spread far and wide. Since every minister and prince visited her, she was better informed than anyone else. Yet Yhwh's fame had also spread throughout the land and, despite her extraordinary beauty, the men of the land had lost their virility along with their courage upon hearing of his extraordinary might.²⁰

The rabbis regarded Rahab's utterance as the consummate affirmation of the power of Israel's god by a Gentile, outdoing any other across the entire span of sacred scripture. Because she acknowledges the presence of their deity both in heaven and on the earth, they deemed Rahab's statement to be even more radical than the profession by the Aramean general Naaman in the book of Kings: "Now I know that there is no god in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15).

Few contemporary biblical scholars would agree with the ancient sages on this point, and rightly so: the words of Naaman constitute one of the most sweeping monotheistic statements in the entire Bible, going far beyond Rahab's monolatrous avowal. Yet the rabbis gave pride of place to Rahab instead of Naaman, and their reason for doing so was that this foreign general, while revering their god, was not interested in becoming a member of their people. The biblical account portrays him importing soil from Eretz Israel and placing it under the altar he builds to Yhwh. This religious reverence, even if it is exclusive to Israel's god, sufficed neither for the biblical writers nor the rabbis. One needed to make a resolute and unswerving commitment to throw his or her lot in with the people of Israel.²¹ Such is what Rahab does. By hiding the spies, she risks her life and

¹⁹ See the exchange between Rav Nachman and Rav Isaac in *b. Meg.* 15a. On the nonprudish character of Jewish and Muslim sacred writings, in contrast to their Christian counterparts, see Ze'ev Maghen, "Dancing in Chains: The Baffling Coexistence of Legalism and Exuberance in Judaic and Islamic Tradition" in Jonathan Jacobs (ed.), *Judaic Sources and Western Thought: Jerusalem's Enduring Presence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 217–237.

²⁰ See n. 29 below for the scriptural formulation that informs this reading. On Rahab in early Jewish literature, see Judith Baskin, "The Rabbinic Transformations of Rahab the Harlot," *Notre Dame English Journal*, 11 (1979), 141–157; Amy H. C. Robertson, "Rahab and Her Interpreters" in Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Rindge, and Jacqueline Lapsley (eds.), *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 109–112; and Tamar Kadari, "Rahab: Midrash and Aggadah," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, February 27, 2009, Jewish Women's Archive, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rahab-midrash-and-aggadah>.

²¹ The biblical authors satirize Naaman. An altar must be built on Israel's soil, if not also in Jerusalem, yet Naaman tries to have the best of both worlds by bringing soil from the land of Israel to his own country. For the issue of unclean land and altar, see the discussion of Josh. 22 in Chapter 5. With respect to rabbinic interpretation, the *Mekilta* identifies

physically demonstrated her allegiance to this nation. Moreover, she performs this action at an uncertain time, when the Israelites had yet to win a battle against Canaan's superior forces and superbly fortified cities.

The rabbis interpreted the concluding statement – “she has continued to dwell in the midst of Israel until this day” (Josh. 6:25) – to mean that she converted and became a “righteous proselyte” (*gēr šedeq*), with most, if not all, the rights and obligations of Jews by birth.²² Rahab is not mentioned elsewhere in scripture, yet the Jewish sages used midrash to mine the biblical genealogies for traces of her descendants. In the process, they “discovered” that she is the ancestress of Israelite priests and prophets (including Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Huldah), and that she even became Joshua's wife.²³ In this way, they eliminated any doubt that the people of Israel fully embraced her in their fold.

CONVERSION AND NATURALIZATION

Whereas Rahab's identity as a Gentile gave her an advantage in Christian sources, it was naturally a problem for Jewish interpreters. Membership of Israel was decided primarily by descent. Although this criterion may seem chauvinistic, what gave rise to it was not racial prejudice but rather the perception that intermarriage severely undermined the effort to create a form of peoplehood that could survive the loss of statehood. As long as one could take for granted the persistence of a powerful territorial state, intermarriage would not pose much of a problem and actually might benefit political alliances. But after imperial armies erased the nation's territorial borders, one had to *do* something to be a Jew. Enculturation of the nation's members in Israel's collective memories – which fostered the formation of the biblical corpus – now assumed an unprecedented role in identity formation. And given the role of parents in enculturation and education, matters surrounding marriage took on a new importance.

Naaman as a *gēr šedeq* who outranks Jethro (*Mek. Rab. Ish.*, Amalek 1), but the Talmud (*b. Git.* 57a) denies this status and designates him as a *gēr tōshāv* (“resident alien”).

²² *p. Ber.* 4.4; *b. Zeb.* 116a–b; *b. Meg.* 14b; *Num. Rab.* 8.9; *Sipre Num.* 78; *Sipre Zuta* on Num. 10:28; *Ruth Rab.* 2.1; *Eccl. Rab.* 5.6, 8.10.

²³ Her marriage to Joshua is likely a later tradition based on the earlier connection to Huldah (see *b. Meg.* 14b). Similarly, the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew presents her and a figure named Salmon as the parents of Boaz (who produces the next descendant with Ruth); the divergent spelling of her name has been used historically, yet unjustifiably, to dispute this reading.

Tackling the problem of intermarriage, the postexilic Judean leader Nehemiah observed that the children of these mixed unions no longer “knew how to speak Judean/Jewish” (Neh. 13:24). As an antidote to this problem of “cultural literacy,” Jewish communities enacted strict measures against intermarriage.²⁴ In Greco-Roman times, Jewish identity came to be defined legally by birth, and later specifically birth from a Jewish woman (i.e., matrilineal descent). All these developments were ultimately elicited and sustained by a realization that procreation and education were the most reliable means of fostering the growth of the Jewish people.

But what about non-Jews who desire to enter the national fold? The rabbis responded to this question by creating a ritual for conversion, and when they did, they studied the lives of such biblical figures as Jethro, Ruth, and Rahab.²⁵ Of course, the biblical accounts do not depict these figures converting to a religion such as “Yahwism.”²⁶ When the ancient sages spoke of conversion, they did not mean an assent of faith or confession of belief followed by baptism, as in Christianity. True, they stipulated that the convert has to testify with a verbal declaration and be immersed in water, but the procedure as a whole is more reminiscent of what we today call “naturalization” – the process by which one becomes a member of a political community.²⁷

²⁴ The expression was coined by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Matrilineal descent is not biblical (but see Ezra 10); it appears to have emerged among the Tannaim, through the influence of Roman law, and at a time of social upheaval. Matrilineal descent is, after all, a more practicable criterion, since one cannot always be sure who the father is, especially in times of turmoil. On the subject, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

²⁵ On the origins of conversion in the Hellenistic period, see Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*. Some Hellenistic Jewish writings (e.g., Jubilees) deny the option of conversion; see Christine E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). On conversion in rabbinic sources, see Moshe Lavee, *The Rabbinic Conversion of Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

²⁶ It doubtful that “Yahwism” has ever existed outside the minds of modern academics and corresponds to a self-conscious community from antiquity.

²⁷ In *Transforming Identity: The Ritual Transition from Jew to Gentile; Structure and Meaning* (New York: Continuum, 2007), Avi Sagi and Zvi Zohar treat the question of whether and how an individual can become a member of the Jewish people without religious conversion.

The declaration that the Jewish convert makes is much more akin to the oaths of loyalty pronounced by citizens of nation-states than to the creeds cited by members of transnational communities of faith, whether it be the Christian church or the Muslim *ummah*. The convert, like the naturalized citizen, takes upon him- or herself the obligation to abide fully by a code of laws. It also became customary by the first century CE to require male converts to undergo circumcision. This fleshly ritual expresses the principle that one becomes a member of the people in a physical sense, in keeping with Israel's character as primarily a political, not cultic, community.

The discontinuity between the biblical accounts of outsiders joining Israel, on the one hand, and the rabbis' approach to conversion, on the other, pivots on the issue of land and location. Rahab, Jethro, and Ruth not only utter unambiguous statements about Israel's god but also, and more decisively, join themselves to the people of Israel in their national territory. Remember that Naaman, in contrast to these respectable figures, stays in his country and builds there an altar to Yhwh on soil imported from the land of Israel.

Rabbinic Judaism charts a new course. Living in an age when the Jewish people no longer enjoyed political sovereignty, and when many of its members had been exiled from their homeland, the rabbis sought a means to establish belonging in their communities without requiring residence in the territories that the nation had long inhabited. By omitting the criterion of territorial residence, the sages did not mean to dismiss the importance of place in the construction of Jewish identity. Indeed, their prayers and hopes remained resolutely fixed on a return to Zion. But in the meantime, they adopted and expanded a core tenet of biblical nationhood: the possibility of being a people even when many of the communities constituting this people did not inhabit, let alone exercise sovereignty over, its national homeland.

For these reasons, Ruth's statement, not Rahab's, came to be recognized as the quintessential expression of the Jewish convert. Naomi repeatedly exhorts Ruth and her sister to go back to their people and gods in Moab. But whereas her sister takes leave of Naomi, Ruth "cleaves" to her and utters the declaration of allegiance that we already considered in Chapter 6:

Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your god my god. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may Yhwh do to me if anything but death parts me from you. Ruth 1:16–17

Ruth's declaration expresses her determination to make Naomi's people and god her own, and to follow her wherever she goes. Naomi's wanderings lead the two back to the land of Judah, but because the declaration leaves the destination open, it lent itself easily to the project of peoplehood that the rabbis inherited from their biblical predecessors and modified for the Jewish diaspora.

THE REPENTANT RAHAB

In contrast to Ruth, Rahab served as an illustration of the power of repentance for the rabbis. According to their expositions, she belonged to a people about whom it was written, "You shall not save even one soul alive" (Deut. 20:16), but because she "brought herself near," the deity also "brought her near." If an exception was made in the case of this Canaanite, "how much more will the Holy One be receptive to Israel, his beloved people, when they act in accordance with his will?"²⁸

Although Rahab's occupation as a harlot likely wouldn't have been a cause for consternation among the earliest biblical readers, it began to elicit opprobrium in a culture that had been shaped by the spread of Hellenism. The rabbis were confident that Rahab relinquished her life of harlotry once she became a member of Israel, even if this life was what had brought her to Israel in the first place. She knew that the tidings of Israel's victories had zapped the Canaanites' strength because she had personally witnessed the shriveling effect of Israel's triumphs on their manhood.²⁹ After forty years of prostitution, she not only repented but also demonstrated her solidarity with Israel by hiding the spies. As a reward for her deeds, she was welcomed among the people of Israel and went on to become, as noted, the ancestress of many of the most important figures in the nation's history.

Whereas prostitution is never proscribed in biblical law, later generations, from the Greco-Roman period and thereafter, condemned this profession, suggesting that she was nothing other than an innkeeper or

²⁸ *Sipre Num.* 78, *Sipre Zuta* on Num 10:28. On repentance in biblical and rabbinic Judaism, see David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²⁹ See *b. Zeb.* 116a-b; *Pesiq. R.* 40.3-4; *Pesiq. Rab. Kab.* 13.4. As the rabbis point out, Rahab's statement in Joshua 2:11 is literally "no longer did a spirit rise in a man because of you" (emphasis added), which is more specific than the similar statement in 5:1 ("there was no spirit in them").

the proprietress of a tavern.³⁰ However, in the ancient Near East, as in the American Old West, taverns and inns were establishments in which men not only could find a meal and bed but also form political alliances and engage in sexual activity.³¹ In reporting that the men went to the house/inn of a prostitute and “slept there,” the narrator leaves it open whether the men had intercourse with Rahab. The authors of the account, who were neither prude nor prurient, may simply not have been interested in the question: the spies enter the house of a prostitute because it promises to be a place where news circulates, and they are interested in learning about the psychological condition of the land’s inhabitants, not the physical condition of its fortifications.³²

Alternatively, the authors of the account may have intended to cast Israelite men in an unfavorable light. According to this option, the story lampoons the spies by presenting them as less honorable than Rahab: upon arriving in Jericho, the men head immediately to a house of pleasure, yet its proprietress turns out to have only one thing on her mind – the power of Israel’s god and the impending invasion of Canaan.³³

Josephus notably avoids the use of “harlot” when describing Rahab. (He has the spies less interested in the enemy’s psychological condition than in inspecting the ramparts and fortifications; when the sun goes down, they repair to “a certain inn” to find refuge for the night.) While prostitution was widely accepted in the Greco-Roman world, prostitutes themselves were forbidden to marry and were banned from public

³⁰ Some may have appealed to a different root for “prostitute” that was used to describe the preparation of food (*zûn*, rather than *zānah*). The latter is in keeping with the “inn-keeper” (*pūndeqītā*) in Targum Jonathan; however, this Aramaic term is used repeatedly in the Targum to translate “prostitute.” On the Hebrew term in biblical texts, see Hannelis Schultz, “Beobachtungen zum Begriff der *zōnā* im alten Testament,” *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 102 (1992), 255–262.

³¹ On the social world of the ancient Near Eastern tavern, see Kelly J. Dixon, “Saloons in the Wild West and Taverns in Mesopotamia: Explorations Along the Timeline of Public Drinking” in Steven N. Archer and Kevin M. Barton (eds.), *Between Dirt and Discussion* (New York: Springer, 2006), 61–79.

³² In Chapter 8, I flesh out this approach, which is also widely adopted in rabbinic interpretation.

³³ See Yair Zakovitch, “Humour and Theology or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Literary-Folkloric Approach to Joshua 2” in Susan Niditch (ed.), *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1990), 75–98; Frank M. Cross, “A Response to Zakovitch’s ‘Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence,’” in Niditch, *Text and Tradition*, 99–104. A more extended study of the comedic elements in Rahab is provided by Melissa A. Jackson in *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

ceremonies.³⁴ However, there's likely another reason why Josephus omits her title: if Rahab is not a harlot, she cannot serve as an illustration of a repentant convert, and this serves Josephus's interest in filtering out many of theological elements in the account. Writing for non-Jewish audiences, the historian eliminated Rahab's declaration about Yhwh's superior power and, in so doing, made it more palatable for his Roman readers.

The rabbis, however, refused to pick and choose from a text whose sacred meanings, they were convinced, could only be discovered by taking seriously all the facts of scripture. Instead of tossing aside details that bothered them, they found a way to connect Rahab's occupation as a prostitute to the unequivocal words she speaks and the commendable deeds she performs.³⁵

FROM RAHAB TO PAUL

The prototypical convert in Christianity is the Apostle Paul – an individual who had made a name for himself by violently persecuting Christian communities before he was “blinded by the light” on the road to Damascus. After turning his life around, he quickly ascends to a position of authority in the early church (see Gal. 1:13–14). Later Christian tradition, beginning with the book of Acts, embellished accounts of this persecution; the aim was, not least, to demonstrate that even an archenemy of the church, with blood on his hands, could not only be forgiven but also rise to the highest ranks of leadership.

It's inconceivable that the United States or any other national community would grant citizenship – let alone a public office – to one who had a history of terrorizing them. In the same way, it makes sense that the scribes who produced the Jewish scriptures, and their rabbinic successors, cast aspersions on Naaman (a foreign general with a record of assaulting

³⁴ See Allison Glazebrook and Madeleine M. Henry (eds.), *Greek Prostitutes in the Ancient Mediterranean, 800 BCE–200 CE* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).

³⁵ Amy H. C. Robertson offers a stunning reading of the Rahab story against the backdrop of its rabbinic interpreters: “Are we to imagine that she could have acted on this faith earlier, but chose not to? Could a 50-year-old woman, a harlot of 40 years, have found a different role in Canaanite society if the social order had not been overturned with the destruction of Jericho? On the contrary, it is more realistic to imagine that, at her core, Rahab herself has changed very little. Instead, the world around her changed – thanks in part to her savvy and bravery – and these changes meant she was no longer stuck in her social role” (“Rahab the Faithful Harlot,” TheTorah.com website, <https://thetorah.com/rahab-the-faithful-harlot/> [2019]).

Israel) when articulating norms for integrating outsiders into their national fold.³⁶

Paul the persecutor is the polar opposite of Rahab the prostitute. Their stories are archetypal, each for a new kind of community: the former for the transnational community of the church, and the latter for the national community of Israel. Faith is the means by which one enters the former, while acts of solidarity and allegiance are the test of membership for the latter. This difference explains why Rahab, in contrast to Paul and Naaman, doesn't rue a record of violence against the people she later joins. She demonstrates exceptional hospitality from the very beginning. And when she's granted an honored place in the nation's midst, the reason is not because she recognizes the power of Israel's god; after all, the inhabitants of Canaan do the same, as she divulges to the spies. A special place of honor is awarded to her rather because she risks her life and the lives of her family for the nation, and then follows through with legal actions to secure special protection.

I do not want to deny the central place that faith occupies both in this story and in the wider national narrative. When Abraham and Sarah – and later the nation after the exodus – embark on a journey to the land of promise, they act in confidence that Yhwh will meet his end of the bargain. What's determinative is action, yet this action is not mere obedience; it's impelled by confidence (Gen. 15:6) that the other party 1) will be "faithful" in keeping the promise or pact (Deut. 7:9) and 2) has the capacity to do what's required. Since Rahab is an outsider to the covenant, these two sides are bifurcated: when she hangs the scarlet cord in her window, she trusts that Israel will keep the pact that she has made with the spies, just as she is confident that Yhwh has what it takes to conquer Canaan.

This chapter has demonstrated the ways in which war commemoration, as a political activity, evolved for theological purposes in formative Judaism and Christianity. In Chapter 8, we turn our attention to the biblical account interpreted by these early readers. Our aim will be to understand the evolution of the Rahab story and the various functions it serves in the biblical narrative.

³⁶ The enemy general Naaman has a past similar to Paul's, but Naaman does not even become a member of Israel, let alone assume a leadership role comparable to the one Paul occupied in the church.