

JOSHUA, JERICHO AND RAHAB THE HARLOT

Joshua 2: 1-24 & 6: 1-25
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The year is 725 BCE and a new king, Hezekiah, has ascended to the throne of Judah with its capital in the city of Jerusalem. He is in his mid-twenties and he is full of ideas.

His great grandfather was King Uzziah, the greatest king since David, and the king whose death occasioned the call of Isaiah to his ministry of prophesy. Hezekiah's grandfather was Jotham, a man whose ability as a monarch was dwarfed by his piety and religious fervor. Under Uzziah and Jotham, Judah grew in wealth, power, territory and influence. Then Jotham died and his son, Ahaz, managed, through cowardice, ineptitude, and ignorance, to lose everything that Uzziah and Jotham had gained.

When young Hezekiah came to the throne he was determined to undo all the mistakes his father had made.

Ahaz had closed the temple and instructed the people to worship idols from the Assyrian pantheon, thinking that this would assuage the Assyrians and keep them from invading. Hezekiah reopened the temple, began repairing the deterioration that had occurred and banished all idols from the country.

Ahaz, in his fear of Assyria, had surrendered vast lands to the Assyrians, hoping to keep them at arm's length. He had taxed the people heavily in order to pay protection money to the Assyrian kings. Hezekiah announced immediately that his goal was to reunite the two tribes of Judah and the ten tribes of Israel into one nation as they had been under David and Solomon.

Then, just three years after Hezekiah became king, the northern country of Israel stopped paying tribute to Assyria and the Assyrians marched south and laid siege to Samaria, the capital city. The siege lasted three years but the city finally fell and the nation with it. The population of Israel was decimated, many killed, some taken back to Assyria as slaves, and thousands were scattered as refugees. Israel ceased to exist as a nation.

The people in Judah watched with awe and anxiety what was happening to their northern brothers and sisters and were nearly paralyzed with fear. Will we be next? Will King Shalmanezzer of Assyria bring his army south to lay siege to Jerusalem? If King Hezekiah continues to ban the Assyrian gods from our worship, will the Assyrians become angry and do to us as they did to Israel?

Hezekiah realized that he needed help if he was going to be able to realize his dream of a united nation and the return of the Davidic Monarchy to power. And the first people he turned to were his historians.

It had been a long time since the people had heard the stories of their history, their heroes, their kings, and their destiny. It was time they heard those stories again. It was time they were reminded that they were not just a loose confederation of primitive tribes, they were a nation. They had been called into being by the one, true God. And this land had been given to them by God and they had taken it with his help and blessing.

Their future, he knew, was to be found in the stories of their past.

So he set his court historians to the task of writing a history of Judah/Israel that would reach back 300 years to the founding of their country and a retelling of those stories in a way that would instill in the people a sense of national pride and even a feeling of national entitlement. It would be a history of one people, one nation under one god, and that one god would be YHWH, the god of the Hebrews.

The result of this effort would be the books that we know as Joshua, Judges, First Kings and Second Kings.

Today, we turn to the first of those inspirational hero stories, the book of Joshua.

Moses has led the Children of Israel in the conquest of the city states east of the Jordan. Now, Moses has died and leadership has transferred to Joshua. His book will tell of the conquering of the peoples west of the Jordan starting with the cities of Jericho, Achan and Ai.

In the later chapters it will recount how the land was divided among the tribes, how the tribes raised altars to remind them that they were a united people, and how certain cities and prerogatives were given to the Levites who received no land because of their duties as priests.

Finally it will tell of the death of Joshua and his funeral and lay the groundwork for the period that would be known as the Age of the Judges.

Today we deal with two stories from that book, the most famous stories: The Battle of Jericho and the Hospitality of Rahab the Harlot. You may be familiar with the first. The second is probably unknown to most of us.

JERICHO

Jericho holds the distinction of being both the oldest and the lowest occupied city in the world. It sits just ten miles north of the Dead Sea and about five miles west of the Jordan River, in a wadi or valley oasis about 250 feet below sea level. In biblical times it was known by three nicknames: In Arabic it was called "The Fragrant City" because of the wild flowers that grew all around it. Canaanites called it the "City of the Moon" because there was a temple, there, dedicated to the Canaanite lunar god or goddess. In Hebrew it was called "The City of Palms" for the profusion of palm trees that grew in and around the wadi.

Close to a river and surrounded by springs, in a low place out of the wind, it was a popular site for human habitation and has, in fact, been continuously inhabited for the past 11,000 years. Archeologists have uncovered twenty different cities that were built at one time or another on that site.

Unfortunately, it is also situated along the same fault line that runs beneath what were the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which makes it vulnerable to earthquakes. And this is where archeological science and biblical story telling bump heads.

The book of Joshua describes the city, at the time of the Israeli invasion, as a huge, formidable, thriving city-state with enormous walls and a fully functioning army. Archeologists tell us that, in fact, all of the evidence shows that the city was in one of its "collapsed" stages, suffering from the effects of a devastating earthquake, at that time.

The archeological record shows that the Israelites conquered Canaan by means of immigration and infusion. They slowly migrated to Canaan, entered the area, set up shop, intermarried with the Canaanites, grew in size, influence and power and, eventually took over.

The oral tradition at the time of King Hezekiah, and the book of Joshua that he ordered written, tell a story of invasion and military conquest, of the Israelites, with God's help, seizing, taking the land from its inhabitants and claiming it for themselves.

Once again, students of the Bible will quickly realize that, as we have discussed before, "history" is never as important as "story." When it comes to the stories of our lives, the events that really happened are never as important as the stories that are told about those events.

And the story that was told was this.

RAHAB THE HARLOT

Immediately after crossing the Jordan, the Israelites were confronted by the huge city-state of Jericho. Joshua sent out spies, as was his custom, and two of them entered the city to have a look-see. Once inside the city walls they made their way to the house of a prostitute named Rahab.

It doesn't say why but most probably it was because the comings and goings of strange and even foreign men would not be noteworthy, there, and they would not attract attention to themselves.

Somehow, probably by their speech or the color of their skin, they were recognized. They were identified as part of that huge mob of people, the Israelites, who had already conquered the cities east of the Jordan and were now on the march toward Jericho and the locals called their police and set out after them.

They ran to Rahab and asked her to hide them, which she did.

She took them to the flat roof of her home and hid them under some flax that had been laid out to dry in the sun. (Historians tell us that flax dried this way was stripped into threads and used to make a very soft and expensive fabric that was used in the making of fine garments. Apparently, Rahab was preparing to branch out into the fabric business.)

The ruse was successful. The police came and looked for the men and, not finding them, they confronted Rahab who said, yes, they had been here on...uh..."business." Then they left. She said that they had talked about returning to their people via the road and suggested that the police look for them there.

When the cops were gone, she sounded the all clear and told the Israeli spies that they should go, not by way of road, but cross country into the hills that surrounded the city and hide out there until things cooled down a bit.

Before they could leave, however, she told them that she had seen the panic in the eyes of her people and heard the rumors about the savage, war mongering, Israelis and she believed every word of it. She believed that the Israelis would, eventually, conquer Jericho and when they did she wanted them to remember that she had helped them. She wanted the lives of herself and her family, spared.

The men agreed. "A life for a life." They gave her a red sash to hang on her door post. When the siege began she was to bring all of her family inside the house and not come out. They, in turn, would spread the word about what she had done and give orders that her house was not to be entered or harmed in any way.

Then, using a rope, she let the men down from a window of her house, which was built into the city wall, and they made their escape into the hills.

THE BATTLE OF JERICHO

Now comes the part of the story that everyone knows: Joshua fit the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down.

While the spies are dashing around through the streets of Jericho and climbing down Rahab's rope to make their escape, the rest of the Israelites are crossing the Jordan River and beginning their invasion of the West Bank.

No sooner do Joshua and the thousands of Israelites make their crossing than Joshua receives a vision of Michael, the archangel who commands the heavenly host, God's army, and Michael tells Joshua how he is to go about taking the city of Jericho.

See, God wants to be sure that the Israelites know (and, three hundred years later, King Hezekiah wants his people to know) that it is God who is delivering this land to them. They do not win it by means of their military prowess but by the grace of God. So the instructions about how to carry out the siege of Jericho are kinda weird.

Distribute trumpets to the seven highest priests and have them lead the people in a procession around the city one time each day for six days. Have them blow the trumpets as they go but the people are to be absolutely silent.

Then, on the seventh day, have them repeat this silent (save for the trumpets) procession around the city seven times and at the completion of the seventh circuit have them shout a loud shout.

Joshua follows the instructions and, sure enough, when the people shout the walls come tumbling down, except, we assume, the wall which contained the home of Rahab the Harlot.

We are told that the Israelites charge into the now unprotected city and kill every living thing in it including the livestock. They loot it as well and bring the gold and silver to Joshua for the national treasury. Then Joshua sends his two spies to find Rahab's house, which they do, and bring her and her family out of the city.

This accomplished, the Israelites then burn the city to the ground.

Rahab, we are told, was welcomed into the nation of Israel and her family "has lived in Israel ever since."

REFLECTIONS

In this years since this story was first written down some 2700 years ago, lots of interpretations and reflections have been written about it – both about the conquest and destructions of Jericho and about the role of Rahab in the story.

One popular Jewish tradition holds that the seven day siege of Jericho happened to fall on the anniversary of the first Passover and notes the parallel between the Hebrews marking their doors with the scarlet blood of a lamb so the angel of death would pass over their houses and families, and Rahab marking her door with the scarlet sash so the angel of death would pass over her home and family.

Recent feminists scholars and theologians have pointed out that prostitution was a legal and acceptable, if not exactly honorable, way for impoverished women to provide for themselves and their families in those days and in that cultural milieu. They also point out that the practice provided sufficient income for Rahab that she could take care of her entire family and finance what appears to be a startup business in the flax and fabric trade.

It is highly likely that the poverty which drove Rahab into prostitution was occasioned by debt. In a culture where there were no laws governing lending and interest rates, debt had become an economic system that fed the very wealthy elite and cast the poor into lives of hopelessness and despair. Debt was nothing less than a vortex that sucked not just the debtor but the entire family into endless generations of indentured servitude.

By throwing in with the Israelites, Rahab, was taking a risk that, if it worked out, would cancel the debt that was holding and, possibly, threatening to enslave her entire family. And her risk did, in fact, work out. Her debt was canceled by the invasion of the Israelites.

Salvation, we learn, comes in many forms and from many sources, often from ones we least expect: From a prostitute living among the enemy, from an invading army. Who knows where a friend is liable to crop up next?

This is one of the lessons of Yad Vashem, the park in Israel that celebrates and remembers those who are called "The Righteous Among the Nations." Those who are honored in this park are gentiles, non-Jews, who risked their safety, and often their very lives, to hide, help, and assist Jews during the Nazi Holocaust. Hundreds of olive trees are planted there, each one bearing a plaque with the name of a Righteous Gentile who gave aid in the face of terrible danger.

And in the very center of the park, on the Avenue of the Righteous, is a statue, a monument to "The Anonymous Rescuer." This contemporary statue depicts a strong but headless person standing erect, behind which crouches a smaller, frightened person, hiding from some unseen threat. It reminds those who gaze upon it that thousands of people, non-Jews whose names were never known or remembered did acts of great kindness and courage one behalf of the Jews and God counts them as righteous, opens his arms to them and includes them in his kingdom, even though they aren't Jews.

In a time when many Christians seem to be obsessed with determining who is in and who is out, who will make it into heaven and who won't, who will be raptured and who will be left behind, it is refreshing to hear a story from our history that talks about inclusion and acceptance of those who everyone would normally think of as on the outside looking in.

One more concluding thought.

A FINAL THOUGHT

As most of you know, every year I make my way to the "Seminar by the Sea" in Myrtle Beach South Carolina with a group of about 25 pastors and church leaders for a week of continuing education, fellowship, and golf. (Yes, we REALLY DO have a continuing education component to this thing!)

A group has been making this pilgrimage for about 40 years, now. I, personally, have made it for 18 of the past 19 years. And, over the years, the group has changed. Only one or two of the original bunch still make the trip, which means that, as time has passed, we have welcomed new people into the mix. Our own Randy Riley joined the group two years ago.

We have realized that, if we want to keep this thing going, we have to reach out to new people who come and make them feel welcome. We have, over the years, come up with different ways of encouraging inclusiveness and hospitality but one of the most noteworthy was what we called the "Rahab the Harlot Award."

For about ten years, each year, people who were there for the first time could nominate anyone in the group to receive the “Rahab the Harlot Award” for demonstrating outstanding hospitality. (Usually, it was a dozen golf balls or some such thing, awarded at the banquet on the last night of the seminar.)

Taking Rahab the Harlot as our model, we realized that the award couldn’t go to someone who was just nice. It had to go to someone who actually went out on a limb, did something risky or self-sacrificial in the name of hospitality, someone who gave up their seat or changed the place they sat at the seminar or made a specific and concrete invitation to dinner or something like that.

See, the story of Rahab has something important to teach us about the nature of radical, righteous hospitality.

Buried deep in the roots of our faith, imprinted on the DNA of Christianity, is the recognition that God counts radical hospitality – hospitality that goes beyond being nice and actually steps out and takes risks to welcome the stranger – as righteousness. As human beings, we may not be capable of being perfectly righteous, but we are capable of being perfectly hospitable, of reaching out to those who are not like us and welcoming them, helping them to feel safe and at home in our midst, taking them into our community and accepting them as one of us. And sometimes, God says, that’s good enough.

This notion of God’s inclusiveness, based not on what doctrines we believe but on how we treat other human beings, is one that we might want to ponder as Christians whose spiritual family tree includes a harlot named Rahab.

AMEN

Questions for Discussion

1. Go to www.yadvashem.org and click the link “righteous.” Read about the “Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations.” What do you think? How does it make you feel? What kind of courage did it take to be one of these people?
2. Rahab took a tremendous risk to help the Israelite spies. Why did she take that risk? Did it pay off for her?
3. What kinds of risks are required of us when God asks us to show hospitality to strangers in our church? What is the payoff for showing hospitality in church?
4. What is the difference in normal hospitality and “radical hospitality?” Why isn’t normal hospitality good enough? Why does God ask that we show radical hospitality?
5. Archeology shows that the Israelite takeover of Canaan came slowly through assimilation, absorption, conversion and attrition. The biblical account shows that the Israelite takeover of Canaan came quickly through violent military conquest. Why do you suppose the two sources differ?