

PART III

RAHAB: AN ARCHETYPAL OUTSIDER

When Jericho's walls come tumbling down, the Israelite troops storm the city and annihilate every living thing, "both men and women, young and old as well as oxen, sheep, and donkeys." Yet there is one family whose lives they spare, that of a harlot named Rahab, and the reason they make an exception for her is that she had previously placed her life on the line for them.

In the days before, a pair of Israelite spies had embarked on a reconnaissance mission in Canaan and ended up in her house. When the king of Jericho found out, he demanded that Rahab deliver the men into his custody. Yet instead of complying with his demands, she concealed the spies on her roof and blatantly lied to the king. Her bold decision to ally herself with Israel imperiled her future and that of her family, but she was certain that doing otherwise posed a greater risk. When she sent the spies away in safety, she revealed to them her confidence in the power of their god. Convinced of the imminent demise of Canaan's kingdoms, she made them swear that they would rescue her and her entire family during the impending invasion.

Rahab is more than "a hooker with a heart of gold."¹ Indeed, her story is a poignant parable of wartime contributions and belonging: by assisting Israel's war effort, she secures protection and a prominent place in a new

¹ Sometimes called "a tart with a heart," this stock character of irony is widely represented in literature, drama, and music. See the entry on the Art & Popular Culture website: www.artandpopularculture.com/Hooker_with_a_heart_of_gold. In *God's Leading Lady* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002), T. D. Jakes suggests that Rahab "may be the original hooker with the heart of gold" (p. 127).

society. As a prostitute, she moves from the margins of a Canaanite city-state to the center of the Israelite nation. The narrator marks the social transition in spatial terms: Her house is located “on the outer side of the city wall, and in the wall she resided.” She occupies a space between the inhabitants of Jericho and those on the city’s horizon. At the moment the wall falls, she abandons the fringes of this Canaanite city and moves to “the midst of Israel,” where “she lives until the present day.”

This is a story of hope and survival. After hearing about the power of Israel’s god, Rahab sees the writing on the wall. Yet instead of consigning herself to the fate of those around her, she finds a way to preserve her life and the lives of her family. The plan she adopts involves considerable risk, but also the promise of a new future. Recognizing the imminent demise of the status quo in Canaan, she casts her lot with the people of Israel and ends up playing a pivotal role in the history of this novel nation. 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.²

Recounted in the first chapters of Joshua, the Rahab story provides the yardstick for evaluating the actions of others in the book. Thus, whereas Rahab bravely risks her life, the Gibeonites (identified as an indigenous population from Canaan) procure a place “in the midst of Israel” by performing a contemptible act of subterfuge. As outsiders in relation to the covenant, both enter the national fold by means of a pact guaranteeing special protection. But in the case of the Gibeonites, the pact is later broken when the nation’s first king pursues a program of genocide against this population.

The Rahab story appears on the seams between the Torah and the Former Prophets, which it introduces. In this strategic position, it treats issues of national identity and belonging in an indirect and safe manner insofar as its protagonist doesn’t represent a particular population (in the way that, for example, Esau represents the Edomites). We will see that Rahab’s purpose is broader: she is the archetype of the outsider who becomes an insider, and the authors of her story wanted their readers to

² We will see that Rahab’s story has often been read in terms of *faith*, yet perhaps a better lens is *hope*, which is also an alternative meaning for the “thread/cord” (*tiqwāh*) that Rahab hangs in her window. Hope is in many ways a biblical invention and a Jewish gift to human civilization (“somewhere over the rainbow . . .”), and it stands in stark contrast to the tragic vision that has long dominated cultural productions from East to West; see Alan Mittelman, *Hope in a Democratic Age: Philosophy, Religion, and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

pay close attention to both her words and her deeds as she negotiated the terms of her survival.

In what follows, we begin, in Chapter 7, by comparing Christian and Jewish interpretation of the Rahab story. Then, in Chapter 8, we investigate the story's origins and its purpose in the wider biblical narrative. Finally, in Chapter 9, we turn our attention to the Gibeonites and witness how the biblical memories and the archeological data related to this group shed light on both the figure of Rahab and the account of the conquest that her story inaugurates.

