



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reading Rahab: How criticism serves itself or eats itself

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Abstract

Studies of the Rahab story in Joshua illustrate how, as interpreters, we can read our interests and convictions into a text, allow it no room to protest that it did not have these interests or convictions, and give it no opportunity conversely to question the interests and convictions that we bring to it as interpreters. This raises the question whether we actually want to discover things from texts or whether we simply want to provide illustrations of and support for what we think already.

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Athalya Brenner begins her entertaining and illuminating retelling of the Rahab story in Joshua 2 by asking what would happen if we rewrote biblical narratives with modern and postmodern concerns in mind, instead of attempting to reconstruct an implied audience, an implied author and an implied theology.¹ I am not sure how ironic she intends to be, but her question strikes me as ironic, because I have been reading numerous studies of the Rahab story written over recent decades, and many of them give me the impression of doing the first even if they seem to be presenting themselves as doing the second.

Rahab has long been subject to interrogation and reinterpretation. Nearly two millennia ago, Origen of Alexandria included a remarkable treatment of the Rahab story in his third homily on Joshua. Part of what he says is:

Rahab means ‘breadth’. What is breadth, therefore, if not this Church of Christ? ... Let us consider the transactions the wise prostitute had with the spies. Having no land, she gives them mystic and heavenly counsel. ‘Go through the mountains’, she says. Do not proceed through the valleys, shun low and dispirited things, proclaim those things that are lofty and sublime. She herself puts the scarlet-colored sign in her house, through which she is bound to be saved from the destruction of the city. No other sign would have been accepted, except the scarlet-colored one that carried the sign of blood. For she knew there was no salvation for anyone except in

¹‘Wide Gaps, Narrow Escapes: I Am Known as Rahab, the Broad’, in P. R. Davies (ed.), *First Person: Essays in Biblical Autobiography* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 47–58.

the blood of Christ. ... Therefore, if anyone wants to be saved, let him come into the house of this one who was once a prostitute. ... Outside this house, that is, outside the Church, no one is saved. If anyone goes outside, he is responsible for his own death. This is the significance of the blood.²

Origen's commentary involves bringing some convictions to the text and finding them illustrated there. He knows that the church is the place where we find salvation, a place that is broad enough to embrace sinners, and that leaving the church means turning one's back on that realm. He knows that this salvation is possible in the church only through the blood of Christ. He knows that spirituality and spiritual development depend on thinking about higher things and not down-to-earth, worldly things. These are among the body of convictions that he brings to the text, though it is not limited to them. Earlier in this same homily on Joshua 1–2 he refers to the Trinity, the incarnation, the gift of the Spirit and other aspects of the Christian perspective with which he comes to Joshua. He approaches the text with the fullness of his Christian perspective and observes features of it that interact with this perspective and provide illuminating, edifying and challenging illustrations of it.

A little over two decades ago, Robert Coote also incorporated a remarkable treatment of the Rahab story in his commentary on Joshua.³ His discussion of Joshua 2 begins:

The story of Rahab is the story of her father's house, as she repeats (2:12, 18; cf. 6:25): father, mother, brothers, sisters, and all who belong to them (2:13, 18; 6:23) – indeed, her entire extended family (6:23). ... The mention of Rahab's mother next to her father reflects the subverting of patriarchal households in Josiah's reform. Rahab's family's fate is tied to her own, not because as the wealthiest member of the family she provides for the rest of them, as some have suggested, but for just the opposite reason: It has fallen to her as a mere daughter to help supply her family's dire need through the unwanted and demeaning necessity of prostitution, for it is the poverty of her extended household that has forced her into prostitution in the first place.

The commentary continues along the same lines. In content, it is thus utterly different from Origen's exposition, but in this article I want to suggest that its hermeneutic is similar. Like Origen, Coote comes to the Rahab story with a set of convictions, which he then finds illustrated there. His introduction to Joshua has described this set of convictions. Behind the book of Joshua is a collection of stories, lists and other material that reflects the monarchic period more than the pre-monarchic period. Specifically, the connected narrative especially points to the reign and reform of Josiah (c.640–609 BCE). In executing his reform, Josiah worked with Assyrian connivance and Benjaminite support, but worked also in the context of opposition that needed to be eliminated. The opposition came from people who could be thought of as 'Canaanites', a term that is more a social or cultural construct than an ethnic designation. In an intriguing parallel with Origen, an implication of the Rahab story is that

²Origen of Alexandria, *Homilies on Joshua*, ed. C. White, trans. B. J. Brown (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2002), pp. 47–9.

³R. B. Coote, 'The Book of Joshua: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections', in L. E. Keck et al. (eds), *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), vol. 2, pp. 553–719.

'Canaanites' need to identify with Joshua/Josiah if they are not to find themselves outsiders, and to lose their lives.⁴

A significant aspect of Josiah's reign was a reconquest by Judah of areas lying north of Jerusalem that had been part of the kingdom of Israel, of which the book of Joshua portrays Joshua's conquest as a precursor. But a significant aspect of Josiah's actual reform was debt relief. Traditionally, the people of Israel had mechanisms to restrain the development of indebtedness and provide for debt easement, mechanisms which are detailed in the Torah. But these had been sidelined or ignored over the century before Josiah, opening up the possibility of accumulation of land by oligarchs. The demands of imperial taxation also issued in further indebtedness.

Coote's introduction thus provides an account of the background to the opening statement in his commentary on the Rahab story, quoted above. It tells readers things that they would not have guessed from the text of Joshua, and it may thus still seem as surprising an introduction to Rahab's story as Origen's comments are. The commentary is able to proceed in the way it does because it works with particular convictions about the origin of Joshua and with some related assumptions about the story's nature as issuing from the placing of a folktale in the context of some Deuteronomistic editing. And its understanding of Rahab's position presupposes some consensus assumptions about the socio-critical background to the story. It is on their basis that it works with aspects of the dynamics in Judahite society that it sees as issuing in the text and leading to its being what it is, and specifically that it takes as enabling us to understand tensions between social classes that surface in the text or lie under its surface. Coote's account of the reign of Josiah itself works in the same way; in their account of Josiah, neither Kings nor Chronicles makes any reference to reforms such as debt easement that Coote emphasises. What is characteristic of the commentary is the thoroughgoing systematic way in which it works with its combination of redactional, historical and socio-critical approaches.⁵

Both Origen and Coote are illuminating, and broadly speaking I have no quarrel with the theological or ethical convictions that either commentator implies in his commentary, but neither of their sets of convictions are present in their text. Both commentators are involved in a process of interpretation that is essentially circular. On one hand, they tell the listener or reader about things that are not in the text as it presents itself. On the other, they make no comment on things in the text that they do not see as significant in connection with matters that do concern them. They do not question the text's value, truth or importance, but what they find in it is what they know already and what interests them.

There are other commentators who work like Origen, such as Theodoret of Cyrus, and there are commentators who pay more systematic attention to the entirety of the story, such as John Calvin and Thomas Dozeman, but I want to focus rather on the

⁴Coote refers in this connection to Lori Rowlett, 'Inclusion, Exclusion and Marginality in the Book of Joshua', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 55 (1992), pp. 15–23.

⁵C. García-Alfonso works in a similar way in her more recent study of Rahab, 'Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematic, Objectives, Strategies', in F. Lozada Jr and Fernando F. Segovia (eds), *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2014), pp. 151–64 (see esp. 158–9); see also Phyllis A. Bird, 'The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts', *Semeia* 46 (1989), pp. 119–39, who works with a combination of the socio-critical and literary in the sense of narrative art.

kind of approach to the text that Origen and Coote take. It is also characteristic of a number of special studies of Rahab over recent decades.⁶

Several thought-provoking studies have drawn attention to parallels between the Rahab narrative and the Disney version of the story of Pocahontas. Among parallels that have been suggested are that the woman falls in love with, has sex with and/or marries a conqueror; she saves the conqueror and helps him against her own people; she embraces his culture; and she surrenders her body and particularly her reproductive powers.⁷ Yet virtually none of these features are present in the text of the story. Like Origen's and Coote's insights, they are read into it. Elsewhere, the Rahab story has been styled as 'porno-tropic',⁸ and Rahab herself has been described as 'hypersexualized' through 'the narrator's emphasis' on her occupation as a prostitute.⁹ Yet neither are these features present in the text; even Rahab's being a prostitute is a one-word mention related to the story's plot, not an emphasis.

Like the interpretations of Origen and Coote, these interpretations make telling points that demand attention. They do so in a context in the present world that is characterised by a preoccupation with sex and where women are treated as sexual objects.¹⁰ They do so in a context where *de facto* imperial powers such as European countries, the United States and China (as well as non-state embodiments of power) exercise domination over subaltern powers. They do so in a context where people of privilege in those countries such as professors, writers of articles for journals and writers of monographs often live better, have better healthcare, travel internationally, have pension plans and take vacations, in a way that the people who empty their rubbish and deliver their packages do not.

Yet that comment begins to point to some ironies. Socio-critical interpretation is often undertaken by people in privileged positions in their societies. Postcolonial interpretation involves taking an imperialist stance in relation to one's text, in which it becomes the victim of my manipulation and can be the means of furthering my career. The text is something 'other' than me and inferior to me, the rational and analytic reader. Feminist interpretations of Rahab can vary according to the interpreter's social location,¹¹ but they can turn Rahab into a victim or tool rather than the powerful,

⁶Theodoret of Cyrus, *The Questions on the Octateuch*, vol. 2, trans. R. C. Hill (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2007); John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Joshua*, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, n.d.); T. B. Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁷L. Rowlett, 'Disney's Pocahontas and Joshua's Rahab in Postcolonial Perspective', in G. Aichele (ed.), *Culture, Entertainment and the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 66–75; S. V. Davidson, 'Gazing (at) Native Women: Rahab and Jael in Imperializing and Postcolonial Discourses', in R. Boer (ed.), *Postcolonialism and the Hebrew Bible: The Next Step* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2013), pp. 69–92.

⁸N. Vaka'uta, 'Border Crossing/Body Whoring: Rereading Rahab of Jericho with Native Women', in J. Havea, D. J. Neville and E. M. Wainwright (eds), *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2014), p. 148.

⁹B. L. Crowell, 'Good Girl, Bad Girl: Foreign Women of the Deuteronomistic History in Postcolonial Perspective', *Biblical Interpretation* 21 (2013), p. 6; cf. K. D. Russaw, 'Reading Rahab with Larsen: Towards a New Direction in African American Biblical Hermeneutics', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 42 (2020), pp. 1–13 (esp. p. 4).

¹⁰See further e.g. E. Runions, 'From Disgust to Humor: Rahab's Queer Affect', *Postscripts* 4/1 (2008), pp. 41–69.

¹¹See R. Wu, 'Women on the Boundary: Prostitution, Contemporary and in the Bible', *Feminist Theology* 28 (2001), pp. 69–81.

articulate and energetic person that she is in the story.¹² In the story, when the two spies return to the Israelite camp, they repeat her words in their report and ‘dance to Rahab’s tune’,¹³ ending up as ‘stooges’ in this ‘parody’ of a spy story.¹⁴ They contrast with Rahab herself, who is ‘the first of the prophets who appear in the historical books to announce to Israel the paths of their history and the first of the women who declare and pronounce the will of God’.¹⁵ In the modern world, it has been noted that Rahab is a person who might have something important to say in the context and the aftermath of the Rwandan conflict.¹⁶ In some African cultures, and specifically in Rwanda, women traditionally have a role in protecting people in danger, and in particular protecting strangers, regardless of considerations of class, race and religion. Rahab fulfils this dangerous role in a way that puts a challenge before Rwandan women for whom this role is also dangerous. That observation fits with another possible reading of the Rahab story itself.

The conquest account begins with a sort of ethical and theological inversion. The power of Israel’s God is perceived, affirmed, and even celebrated by the ‘conquered’. It is due to the religious perceptiveness of a Canaanite woman and harlot, for God’s sake, that the Israelites first gain a toehold in the Promised Land. In the story of Rahab, the stock notion of Canaanite wickedness is ironized and radically relativized, if not demolished altogether.¹⁷

Reading a story such as Rahab’s in light of (for instance) our socio-critical, feminist and postcolonial convictions can enable us to see things, but it can also mean that we function like Origen in practising forms of interpretation that prevent us from learning anything that operates outside the framework of what we already think. We can see only outworkings or implications or examples of what we already know, and where the text does not say what we already know, we can reinterpret it so that it does.

The question then becomes, why are we engaged in this interpretative exercise? What is the point? For instance, does it contribute to the lives of the victim, the subaltern? Or is it simply intellectually satisfying? Or does it mainly further our careers or make us feel good, or virtuous, or vindicated?

The notion of criticism thus begins to deconstruct – or rather, its presuppositions begin to come out into the open. When I engage in critical study, I do so on the basis of a framework that I bring to the topic, a framework that by definition at that point is not amenable to being questioned by whatever I am criticising. But a corollary is that I may learn little unless I am also willing to be questioned back by the object of

¹²See e.g. C. Comte, ‘Sauve qui sait: l’efficace “Madame Rahab” (une approche narrative de Josue 2)’, *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 112 (2011), pp. 55–84.

¹³A. Toczyski, *The ‘Geometrics’ of the Rahab Story: A Multi-dimensional Analysis of Joshua 2* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), p. 62.

¹⁴M. E. Biddle and M. A. Jackson, ‘Rahab and her Visitors: Reciprocal Deliverance’, *Word and World* 37 (2017), p. 226.

¹⁵T. Frymer-Kensky, ‘Reading Rahab’, in M. Cogan, B. L. Eichler and J. H. Tigay (eds), *Tehillah Le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), p. 62.

¹⁶Cf. R. Nyirimana-Mukansengimana and J. A. Draper, ‘The Role of Women in Creating Safe Space for “Strangers”: Reading of Joshua 2:1–21 and John 18:15–17 from the Context of Rwandan Conflict’, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 152 (2015), pp. 96–113.

¹⁷E. F. Davis, ‘Critical Traditioning: Seeking an Inner Biblical Hermeneutic’, *Anglican Theological Review* 82 (2000), p. 742.

my critique and to rethink my framework. To put it in Bultmann's terms, I need to avoid letting my pre-understanding harden unchanged into a (supposed) understanding, without its having the opportunity to nuance my understanding.¹⁸ Or to put it in Gadamer's terms, I need to avoid absolutising my present horizon with the result that another horizon cannot broaden it.¹⁹ Or to put it in Steiner's terms, I need to work with 'the hermeneutic motion' that assumes that 'there is "something there" to be understood'.²⁰

Perhaps the interpreters who engage in the kind of interpretation I have been describing have gone through such a process and have then reaffirmed their preliminary interpretation or their initial horizon. But it generally looks as if they simply take for granted a consensus that works in our cultural context. For instance, many interpreters of the Rahab story appreciate the folktale, but don't like the 'Deuteronomistic' reworking of the story. Nor do they like the way the story describes Rahab as affirming the truth of the Israelite convictions expressed in her statements about the Red Sea event and about Yahweh as God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. They work within the context of a consensus that being Deuteronomistic is a Bad Thing. Marginal to the Rahab story, but present, is the motif of *hērem* (Rahab uses only the related verb), a feature of Deuteronomic or Deuteronomistic thinking that in our cultural context seems obviously misguided and needs no critique.

If we don't simply make those assumptions, or if we allow (with Steiner) for the possibility that even here there might be something to discover, then we may discover something.²¹ In doing interpretation, one has to take some things for granted, and that consensus about Deuteronomism and *hērem* may seem firm enough for there to be no need to think in terms of the text questioning it. There are thus aspects of our horizon that it does not occur to us to question. But at some time we need to do so. Otherwise our critical studies are indeed doing covertly what Athalya Brenner does overtly.

In some respects there is nothing wrong with that, in itself. As well as fitting with what Origen and Theodoret do, it fits with what the New Testament does. The New Testament approaches the Jewish scriptures with some assumptions about Jesus that it then finds expressed there, sometimes in ways that are exegetically defensible on the basis of canons of interpretation that work in a modern cultural context, sometimes in ways that raise eyebrows and require deft footwork on the part of interpreters who feel the need to justify them. The implication is not that the New Testament (or Origen or Coote) learn nothing from their texts, as if they are simply allegorising them in the sense of making them say only things that the interpreters have brought to their text. The implication is rather that the interpretative approach determines the kind of thing that the interpretation will find there.²²

¹⁸See e.g. R. Bultmann, 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?', in *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 145–53.

¹⁹See H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2006).

²⁰G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (London: OUP, 1975), p. 296.

²¹This stance in relation to Rahab and Joshua more generally and to *hērem* finds productive expression decade after decade in the work of L. D. Hawk, who seems unable to give up worrying away at Joshua: see e.g. his commentary *Joshua* in the Berit Olam series (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000); and on Rahab in particular, 'Strange Houseguests: Rahab, Lot, and the Dynamic of Deliverance', in D. Nolan Fewell (ed.), *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), pp. 89–97; and 'Indigenous Helpers and Renegade Invaders: Ambivalent Characters in Biblical and Cinematic Conquest Narratives', *Journal of Religion and Film* 20/3 (2016), article 24.

²²My comments here overlap with James Barr's discussion of typology and allegory in *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments*, 2nd edn (London: SCM, 1982), pp. 103–48.

Rahab gets no reference in the Jewish scriptures beyond Joshua, though she features in rabbinic works (*b. Megillah* 14b–15a relates how she married Joshua and was one of the four most beautiful women in the world). The three New Testament references to her both illustrate the way interpretation can be shaped by the framework the interpreter brings to the text and also look less open to critique on the basis of modern canons than Origen or Coote. Rahab appears in Matthew 1:5 among the sequence of people in the ‘story’ in the form of a genealogy that leads from Abraham to David to the exile to Jesus (and appears as one of the women about whom questions could be raised). She appears in Hebrews 11:31 as someone who responds by faith to what she hears of what God has done, and in James 2:25 as someone who responds with action to what she hears of what God has done.

The problem, then, does not lie in the way interpretation may bring a set of convictions to the text and simply find them illustrated there – if they are good convictions. The problem lies in what it does not do. Because on one hand it holds back from discovering and interacting with what the text itself specifically has to say, which at the very least fails to fulfil an ethical obligation towards the people who wrote the story and the people who appear in it. And on the other hand, at the same time as reinforcing the views we hold already, it avoids encouraging us to reflect on our views and possibly broaden them. Instead, our criticism serves itself or eats itself. I’m sure mine does, too.