

# Midwife in Israel: Rahab's Story

*John Pople*

*Then she sent them away, and they departed;  
and she bound the scarlet cord in the window.*

*(Joshua 2:21)*

## Midwife in Israel

Israel is not yet born as a nation. They are still a wandering tribe of vagabonds. They've escaped slavery in Egypt through Moses, but for the past four decades they've circumnavigated the wilderness lands south of Canaan as punishment for their cowardice. Israel had stood on the brink of taking the Promised Land forty years before, but when God directed them to attack they failed in faith and heart, their first effort at conquest crashing in abortive failure.

Since then Moses has 'gone the way of all flesh,' to use the decorous 17C English; and God has personally buried him in a secret place in Moab (Dt 34:6). Joshua stands tall as the new leader. The time has come, God decrees, and He calls Israel to attack again, to renew their drive to acquire the prize He promised. Battles en route to Canaan have killed Sihon and Og, the Amorite kings east of the Jordan river, and overcome their armies. For the second time now, Israel stands assembled on Jordan's banks at the very threshold of the Promised Land, poised for destiny.

Jericho will be their first battle of conquest.

Memories of their parent generation's failure must be torturing the minds of the military rank and file. Cautiously, Joshua sends spies ahead to scope the land and develop his warfare strategy. Joshua had once been a spy for Moses in the same capacity (Num 13), so he knows the value of espionage intelligence. Joshua tells the spies to focus on Jericho, doubtless because it is the local stronghold, and two spies are dispatched to the city.

It's in this context that I feel God is presenting Rahab as His nation's midwife. It's a role that perfectly encapsulates how she enables Israel to come to life within the Land God had promised them, and we'll see quiet but compelling evidence of her as Israel's midwife as events unfold.

## Resisting Evil in Power: A Midwife's Tale

On arrival in Jericho, the spies go to a prostitute's house for the night. We might raise a disapproving eyebrow from our comfortable armchair viewpoint, but lives are on the line, and this is a smart choice of venue for two foreigners trying to arouse minimum suspicion. Unfortunately their ruse is unsuccessful, and word about where the spies are housed gets to Jericho's king. But this is no ordinary prostitute: Rahab the Canaanite has considerable resolve, and she will easily outmaneuver the king of Jericho to play a founding role in the nation of Israel.

Her name “Rāḥāb” means ‘wide’ or ‘broad.’ Biblical names are commonly given to reprise a principal feature of a person's Story or character: we've seen already the value of understanding Deborah as a “firebrand woman”<sup>1</sup> and Jael as the faithful one from the “group of Kenite”<sup>2</sup> traitors. Rahab's name may derive from the placement of her house, which is critical to the plotline. Jericho's city walls are sufficiently broad that houses exist on them, and Rahab's is one such. This ‘broad wall’ (rāḥāb ḥômā) is a common city design over many centuries, some are still visible today in northern Italy, and they're mentioned elsewhere in scripture (e.g. Jer 51:58). It's from this vantage that Rahab safely liberates the spies after the city gates are shut, by lowering them to the ground on a scarlet cord from her windows on the city wall's edge.

More importantly, Rahab is courageous. When challenged by the king of the city to surrender the spies, she is not afraid to deceive him, telling him the spies have slipped away just before the city gates closed. In reality she has hidden the men in the flax leaves she laid out on the roof, in bold defiance of regal edict. Sensitive to our midwife hypothesis, already we hear a gentle echo of the brave Hebrew midwives who defied the king of Egypt, by refusing his command to murder the male Hebrew babies in their care (Ex 1:15-21). The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (meaning “beautiful” and “brilliant,” possibly also attributed names to convey God's pleasure),

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pressjournal.org/mother-in-israel-deborahs-story-text>, accessed Jun 2022

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pressjournal.org/serpent-slayer-jaels-story-text>, accessed Jun 2022

deliberately misled the king of Egypt – just as Rahab deliberately misled the king of Jericho – and the Hebrew males they were protecting were saved. In both cases we see the females in the lead role protecting the males who are vulnerable to a predatory authority which the women ward off; and God rewards the faithful women for honouring Him and not flinching before the wicked edicts of powerful men.

## Mercy and Judgment

Rahab knows of Israel's conquests and, in her spiritual insight, perceives they have been secured by a living and active God. She confidently realizes that Israel will take Jericho, so she immediately barter with the spies to save the lives of her family.

*“Now then, since I have dealt kindly [ḥesed] with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly [ḥesed] with my family.” (Jos 2:12)*

Rahab reminds the spies of the merciful kindness she has shown them and requests reciprocal consideration: ḥesed for ḥesed. But there's a problem. Israel has been commanded to utterly destroy the inhabitants of Canaan, and that includes Rahab.

*But of the cities of these peoples which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall [ḥāram] utterly [ḥāram] destroy them [ḥāram]: the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you. (Dt 20:16-17)*

The Hebrew text is remarkable to my Anglicized eyes: the imperative “you shall utterly destroy them” is just three consecutive identical words: “ḥāram ḥāram ḥāram” (lit. “destroy! destroy! destroy!”). The triplet phrase literally could not be stronger, and communicates the concept that God has censured something so heavily it must be totally and utterly annihilated. Violation of the law of ḥāram is heinous, and a man named Achan will do precisely this in the battle of Jericho, when he steals a wedge of gold, 200 shekels of silver, and a Babylonian garment which attracted him. God announces Achan's dire destiny to Joshua.

*Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things [ḥērem]... Therefore the children of Israel... have become doomed to destruction [ḥērem]. Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed [ḥērem] from among you.” (Jos 7:11-12)*

Achan confesses, but it's too late. He and all his family are stoned to death and their bodies burned. Such is the rigidity and severity of ḥāram. Thus, to grant Rahab's request for mercy would also violate the commanded ḥāram, because she is a Canaanite and among the 'accursed things.' She cannot be granted mercy.

Except... Rahab shows her qualities as a Leading Lady in understanding the character of Israel's God. Firstly, she shows she understands His concept of ḥāram: she acknowledges seeing it in the destined fate of the Amorite kings.

*“For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed [ḥāram]. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any man, because of you; for the LORD your God is he who is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.” (Jos 2:10-11)*

Secondly, and most importantly, Rahab's faithfulness and godliness perceives the core truth. For Israel's God, ḥesed always trumps ḥērem: mercy always trumps judgment.

Rahab instinctively knows this; her eye of faith sees it as plain as day. She knows that as a willing convert to Israel's God, calling on her considerable faith upon His mercy, she is exempted from ḥērem. It's a brilliant and accurate perception. To the spies' credit, they understand this too, and they confidently promise her salvation from Israel's conquest without failing their God.

*“Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly [ḥesed] and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land.” (Jos 2:14)*

With that, Rahab assists the spies to escape, saving their lives by lowering them from her windows beyond the city wall with a scarlet cord.

If we look again carefully at Rahab's request for mercy, we see more of her godly character.

*“Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.” (Jos 2:13)*

Notice the list of those Rahab wants saved from destruction: her father, her mother, her brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them. She doesn't mention herself, except by implication at the very end when she pleads for “our” lives to be spared. Rahab's altruism is inspiring. The fact she's a prostitute will cause some to disdain her, but such judges should take

pause, because what we are shown on the Heavenly plane is an intrinsically selfless and godly woman, primarily interested in saving her family before herself.

## Alongside Abraham

When the apostle James seeks to bolster his New Testament argument that true faith is only validated by the actions it provokes, he cites just two examples: Abraham and Rahab.

*Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”; and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the harlot justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way? (Jam 2:21-25)*

Why these two? Does James wish to pick a male and a female example, to show that powerful faith is held independent of gender? Quite possibly. Does he wish to pick one rich person: estate and livestock owner Abraham, who literally commanded an army of men, alongside one poor person: courtesan Rahab, to show that exemplary faith is independent of wealth? Again, quite possibly. Does James wish to pick one person revered in society: the great “Father Abraham” – referenced that way by Stephen (Acts 7:2), Paul (Rom 4:16), and vicariously even by Jesus himself (Lk 16:19-31) – alongside one person commonly socially belittled: a prostitute, to show great faith is also independent of one’s social status and propriety? That would be an excellent reason too. But most likely James has selected Abraham and Rahab because of their actions per se. Since James’ point is the importance of faith producing action, the actions themselves are most likely his reason to choose them. And what are those actions? To view them with Earthly eyes: Abraham attempted to murder his own son and Rahab betrayed her own people. Standing alone, devoid of context, these are the most repugnant acts a human could commit: attempted filicide and treason! Both are capital offences in many cultures, commanding the death penalty. So to have performed either, as Abraham and Rahab respectively did, marks them as acts of ultimate faith, because these choices have the potential to render them hated and condemned among their own people.

I suspect this is what provokes James the apostle to think of Rahab when he was seeking to testify to the very best works of faith from history, and in so doing, we see his inspired commentary placing Rahab alongside Father Abraham.

Rahab's faith in God was well placed: she is duly delivered from accursed Canaan. She is plucked from the fire of ḥērem, which fire literally consumes the bodies of Achan and his family. There's a final, intriguing match with Abraham here too. Abraham's origin is given as "Ur of the Chaldeans." We recall God's dramatic announcement: "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess" (Gen 15:7), which promise is partly fulfilled in Rahab's day when Abraham's children occupy the land for the first time. It's usually assumed God speaks of Ur purely as a geographical location, perhaps because the "land to possess" which is mentioned in context is a geographical location. But I think God's pronouncement is chiefly spiritual. The Hebrew 'Ūr' means 'flame.' I believe God is saying He plucked Abraham from the *fire* of the Chaldeans; a statement not geographically oriented, but pregnant with spiritual meaning. The Chaldeans are marked for destruction – hell-fire, if you will – but God sees a valuable man of faith who is worthy of salvation and so God reaches out to save him. Abraham is plucked from the hell-fire of the Chaldean ḥērem. And here we see Rahab, presented by James as Abraham's equal, plucked from the hell-fire of the Canaanite ḥērem.

It's a familiar Biblical motif. When God says: "I am the Lord who brought you from the Fire of the Chaldeans" it's echoed by His comment to Israel: "You were like a burning stick snatched from the fire" (Amos 4:11), and His rebuke to the Satan: "The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not [Jerusalem] a brand plucked from the fire?" (Zech 3:2) And Daniel's three friends experienced the real-life version of being plucked by God from Nebuchadnezzar's fire, which the Babylonian king had stoked to kill them, and which had already consumed his own soldiers (Dan 3:19-30).

God "plucks from the flames" those few things that are valuable. Like Abraham. Like Rahab.

### Hidden in the Flax

*[Rahab] had, however, brought [him] up to the roof and hidden [him] with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. (Jos 2:6)*

Tikva Frymer-Kensky illuminates some rare word play here.<sup>3</sup> The word used to “hide” the spies (ṣāḫan) is conjugated with a singular suffix. In other words, the text says: “she hid *him*,” when it’s abundantly clear there are two spies. English translations invariably ‘correct’ this ‘error’ and print the plural form. But is it an error? What if something intentional, yet subtle, is in play? What if the word appears with a singular suffix in Rahab’s Story to deliberately match the only other time in scripture it appears this way?

*When [Jochebed] could hide (ṣāḫan) him no longer she got a papyrus basket for [Moses], and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. (Ex 2:3)*

Jochebed hides her baby, Israel’s nascent leader, among the bulrushes. Moses is later retrieved by Pharaoh’s daughter, who decides to hire a midwife to raise the baby. A cunning ruse by Moses’ sister Miriam, who was watching over the papyrus cradle the whole time, results in Jochebed herself being selected as midwife, even though she’s the mother. From our perspective, what’s important is that the word ṣāḫan is used when a midwife hides a vulnerable baby Israelite (Moses) among the river flora. So when ṣāḫan is used to describe Rahab hiding the spies among the flora laid out on her roof, the match with Jochebed’s case implies the spies are vulnerable (baby) Israelites, and Rahab is their protective midwife. It’s a speculative proposal based on the match of a single word form, which is too weak to support an idea by itself. But we’ve already seen Rahab mirror the scene of the brave Hebrew midwives interrogated by the king of Egypt and, more compellingly, there are two more tangible clues which identify Rahab as Israel’s spiritual midwife more confidently. The unlikely duo of circumcision, and the scarlet cord.

## Circumcised the Eighth Day

Israel have just crossed the Jordan, and are encamped at Gilgal (Jos 4:19), very close to Jericho, as a staging point for their debut battle. God then issues what seems to be a very oddly timed command:

*At that time the Lord said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the people of Israel again the second time.” (Jos 5:2)*

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<sup>3</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Reading the Women of the Bible,” 2002, p36

Why do this? The immediate text explains that this younger generation had not been circumcised as their parents were, which fact harbours a very dark portent in itself. It suggests the mindset of the generation sentenced to wander to death in the wilderness really had mentally and emotionally given up on their faith and the observations of the law – even to the potential detriment of their own children! – whom they left in a state contrary to the commands of their God. But that only explains why the current soldiers are uncircumcised, not why God chooses to circumcise them at this time.

This timing of God’s command for circumcision fits perfectly with our suggested motif of God viewing this as the ‘birth’ of His nation Israel, and Rahab facilitating that birth as midwife.

We can be precise. God’s Law dictated that newborn males should be circumcised on the eighth day (Lev 12:3). We know Israel crossed the Jordan River on 10th Abib (Jos 4:19) and were circumcised “at that time” (Jos 5:2). We can take that latter phrasing as immediate, because the celebration of Passover, on 14th Abib, comes later. If God is true to His own laws, and I confidently assume He is, then we can count back from the Jordan transit and find the day that God views as His nation’s birthday!

Counting backwards: the Israelites camped for three days at the Jordan before they crossed it (Jos 3:1-2). They took up station at Jordan’s banks after hearing the spies’ positive report (Jos 2:23-24), after the spies returned from three days hiding in the hills to ensure their pursuers from Jericho’s military didn’t find them (Jos 2:22). So Israel’s Birthday – according to Divine Sight – is the day before that.

The day they met Rahab.

This gives us another subtle, yet powerful, revelation of God presenting Rahab as Israel’s midwife: His command for circumcision on the eighth day after Rahab’s actions. Consider the timeline. Israel are still outside the Promised Land. They will have a fearful memory of their aborted invasion of forty years ago, when their cowardice angered God and He sentenced the entire generation to extinction. But they have begun again by spying out the land, and particularly the stronghold Jericho. Here is where Rahab is invaluable. Not only does she provide a base from which the spies can operate, but she imparts vital, game-changing intelligence. She lets the spies know that the Canaanites are already terrified of Israel! (Jos 2:9-11) In fact Rahab’s testimony of the strength of Israel’s God is far more faithful and praise-oriented than most of Israel’s!



*“The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below.” (Jos 2:11)*

Consider the effect Rahab’s words will have on Israel’s soldiers. Without doubt, learning that your enemy army is terrified of you is vitally encouraging and inspiring news to any warrior’s ears!

This day constitutes Israel’s birthday, in God’s eyes. The day Rahab hid the spies, delivered her messages of encouragement and faith in Israel’s God and, critically, the day she tied the scarlet cord on Canaanite Jericho. It’s the day the midwife contributes most directly, which is, of course, the day of birth. Truly Rahab facilitated Israel’s entry into the Promised Land in exactly the way that a midwife delivers a baby into the world.

Does this matter? I believe so, because otherwise Rahab’s glorious elevation by God goes unseen. A less careful analysis might conclude that Israel’s birthday was the day they crossed the Jordan, because the Jordan crossing is clearly a baptismal moment, and it is often inaccurately reasoned that baptism is the start of discipleship. But then God would have called for Israel’s circumcision on Day 1, which is inconsistent with His own law that circumcision is warranted on the eighth day. So we dial back a week to discover the true day of Israel’s birth, and thereby glimpse the beautiful scene where Rahab is chosen by God as midwife for His people; a profound and signature honour.

## Salvation in Scarlet

The men said to her, “We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you if we invade the land and you do not tie this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down....” She said, “According to your words, so be it.” She sent them away and they departed. (Jos 2:17-18, 21)

We remember the precedent of the scarlet cord. When Tamar was in labour with twins – interestingly from an act of prostitution into which she had been forced – the midwife tied a scarlet cord around the arm of the (nascent) firstborn; this son thus earning the name Scarlet (Zerah). However, the other twin overtook his brother and broke out of Tamar’s womb before him, earning the name Breakout (Perez). Perez, the one who displaced his brother, is chosen by God to bear Messiah’s line. This sets Perez, about whom we otherwise know nothing, as something of a genealogical origin – a patriarch in his own right. Perhaps that’s why Bethlehem’s citizens call a blessing upon Ruth’s descendants from the ancestral origin of Perez (Ruth 4:12).

God's people Israel are born into their land via Rahab the prostitute, just as Tamar's prostitution birthed Perez. The spiritual point of the scarlet cord, however, is this. The land of Canaan already has a populace; in human terms these indigenous Canaanites are the 'rightful' inhabitants of the land; the First Nation people, if you will.

God doesn't desire to set a precedent whereby invasion and displacement of an indigenous populace is His signature style. So, via the scarlet cord symbol, God shows His exceptional permission for an indigenous people to be displaced, for Israel to break out against Canaan and displace them, as Perez had innocently done to Zerah. In the same way as with Tamar's birth, a midwife will be chosen to tie a scarlet cord around the firstborn, to signal the impending displacement. Which is what we see.

*Then [Rahab] tied the scarlet cord in the window. (Jos 2:21)*

When Rahab ties the scarlet cord on Jericho, her destiny – and that of her city – is sealed. Israel breaks out against their brethren, and takes the land. The Promised Land has been entered in earnest, and God's Kingdom is born on Earth. A Kingdom dedicated to Heavenly principles and practices, yet which is owned and populated entirely by humans. This Kingdom will fail, and fall, but in so doing will provide the necessary education that we can only be saved by grace through faith, just as Rahab was (Jam 2:25).

Who then is Rahab? We can say Rahab is a Canaanite prostitute. We can say Rahab is the Divinely appointed midwife to God's own people. And whichever we see, and say, actually tells us more about who we are than who Rahab is. With Earthly eyes, we will see Earthly things, and we will see Rahab as the prostitute, which she surely was. But with Heavenly eyes, we are enabled to see Heavenly things, and on that plane we see Rahab standing tall as a Leading Lady: appointed by God to deliver His nation into the Land He promised them so many years before. Scarlet woman she may be, but Rahab plays a vital role in bringing salvation to God's people as she births them anew.