

Women in Scripture



*A Dictionary of
Named and Unnamed Women in the
Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books,
and the New Testament*



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WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

Rahab

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with whom you find your gods will not live" (Gen 31:32). The reader knows what Jacob does not—that Rachel has taken the gods and is now in danger, not only from her father, but also from the oath. Laban must not find the gods. Rachel, a trickster like her father, her aunt (Rebekah), and her husband, thinks of a stratagem. She places the gods under her seat and declines to rise because she is menstruating (Gen 31:33–35). Her womanhood perhaps disqualifies her from receiving the teraphim legitimately; so she uses her womanhood to prevent Laban from taking them away once she has taken them illegitimately.

In the end, Rachel's stratagem comes to naught. She could not keep the teraphim, for Jacob commands his household to bury (NRSV, "put away") all their foreign gods, which almost certainly would include these teraphim (Gen 35:2). More tragically, in a sad irony, the very womanhood that has helped her trick Laban thwarts her daring and her ambition in a way that has plagued women through the ages. Finally fertile, she dies bearing her second child, Benjamin. Jacob buries her where she died, in her own tomb (Gen 35:20; 48:17) and not in the ancestral tomb at Machpelah.

There is one more twist to the story. Rachel, who died young, becomes an image of tragic womanhood. Her tomb remained as a landmark (see 1 Sam 10:2) and a testimony to her. She and Leah were remembered as the two "who together built up the house of Israel" (Ruth 4:11). Rachel was the ancestress of the Northern Kingdom, which was called Ephraim after Joseph's son. After Ephraim and Benjamin were exiled by the Assyrians, Rachel was remembered as the classic mother who mourns and intercedes for her children. More than a hundred years after the exile of the North, Jeremiah had a vision of Rachel still mourning, still grieving for her lost children. Moreover, he realized that her mourning served as an effective intercession, for God promised to reward her efforts and return her children (Jer 31:15–21). After the biblical period, "Mother Rachel" continued to be celebrated as a powerful intercessor for the people of Israel.

TIKVA FRYMER-KENSKY

See also Part I: Bilhah; Leah; Rebekah.

FOR FURTHER READING: Greenberg, Moshe. "Another Look at Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim."

Niditch, Susan. *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Holiness*.

Pardee, Ilana. *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*.

Spanier, Kitzah. "Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim: Her Struggle for Family Primacy [Gen 31]."

van der Toorn, Karel. "The Nature of the Biblical Teraphim in the Light of the Cuneiform Evidence."

RACHEL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

(Matt 2:18)

Characteristic of the Gospel of Matthew is the repeated claim that various events in the life of Jesus fulfill particular prophecies found in Jewish Scripture. In Matthew's version of the birth and infancy of Jesus (a narrative with striking resemblances to the birth and infancy of Moses in Exodus), Herod the Great (ruled 37 B.C.E.–48 C.E.) learns that a child has been born who will be king of the Jews. Terrified at the prospect, Herod authorizes the slaughter of all children (probably meaning all boys) of two years of age and younger, in Bethlehem and its vicinity, thus recalling Pharaoh's response to news of the birth of Moses (Exod 1:15–22). According to Matthew 2:18, this wholesale infanticide fulfills a prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah, in which the matriarch Rachel weeps inconsolably for her children. In its own context, Gen 31:15 depicts Rachel, second wife of the patriarch Jacob, grieving over the exile of northern Israelite tribes by the conquering Assyrians in the eighth century B.C.E.

ROSS S. KRAMER

Rahab

Hebrew *ṛahab*, from the root *ṛhḥ*, "to be wide, enlarge"; possibly a shortened form of a theophoric name meaning "God has enlarged"

RAHAB IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

(Josh 2; 6:16–25)

A Canaanite woman living in Jericho, Rahab is a prostitute who is also a biblical heroine. According

to the narrative in Joshua 2, before the conquest of Canaan, Joshua sends two men as spies to see the land. They come to Rahab's house for lodging, information, and/or sex. The king, hearing about the two men, demands that Rahab give them up. Like the midwives in Egypt, Rahab is faced with a "moment of truth." Like them, Rahab defies the ruler and rescues the Israelites. She tells the king's men that the two men have left and that the king's men should chase them. Meanwhile, she has hidden the men under the flax drying on her roof (2:4); the writer uses the unusual word *tšpēnô*, "she hid him" (even though there are two men), perhaps as an allusion to Exod 2:2, where Moses' mother hides her newborn (*tšpēnêlêl*). Rahab is midwife and mother to Israel in its beginnings in Canaan.

Rahab lets the two men out through her window, which is in the town wall. She requests a return for her act of *hesed* ("special benevolence": NRSV, "I have dealt kindly"). She asks that she and her family be spared once the Israelites attack Jericho. The spies give her a crimson thread to hang from her window, with the injunction that she is to gather her family and wait inside her house; as long as they stay indoors, they will be spared. When the Israelites destroy Jericho, as described in Joshua, Rahab and her whole extended family indeed escape doom by waiting inside a house marked with a red thread, just as the Israelites who stayed in houses marked with the blood of the paschal lamb were spared the fate of the Egyptians. They are exempted from the *herem*, Israel's obligation to destroy all Canaanites (see 6:17), and are brought out of the city to live "in Israel ever since" (6:25). Rahab and her family are a new Israel.

Rahab has a special function in the biblical narratives of Israel's existence in the land. When uncovering the men, she explains that she knows that God will give Israel the land (2:8). She has heard about the events of the Red Sea and the defeat of the Amorite kings Og and Sihon, and she declares (quoting from the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15; see v. 11) that "fear" has fallen on the inhabitants and that they all "fear" Israel (2:9). This is the message that the men bring back to Joshua. Rahab is thus

the oracle of Israel's occupation of the land. Another woman, the prophet Deborah, announced a major victory in the taking of Canaan; and the end of Israel's occupation of the land is pronounced by yet another woman, the prophet Huldah. Rahab, who begins as triply marginalized — Canaanite, woman, and prostitute — moves to the center as bearer of a divine message and herald of Israel in its new land. Even though later generations of readers have been squeamish about her occupation, preferring to think of her as an "innkeeper," she is remembered in Jewish tradition as the great prostitute, as ancestress of kings and prophets, and, in the New Testament, as ancestress of Jesus.

TIKVA FRYMER-KENSKY

SEE ALSO Part II: Mother (and Father) and Sisters (and Brothers) of Rahab (Josh 2:3, etc.); Women (and Men) of Jericho and Ai (Josh 6:21, etc.).

FOR FURTHER READING: Bird, Phyllis. "The Harlot as a Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presuppositions in Three Old Testament Texts."

Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. "Reading Rahab."

RAHAB IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

(Matt 1:5)

The prostitute from Jericho (Joshua 2, 6), Rahab is the second woman named in Jesus' genealogy. According to Matt 1:5, "Salmon [was] the father of Boaz by Rahab," and thus Rahab is Ruth's mother-in-law. There is no hint of this relationship in the Hebrew Scriptures; to the contrary, Salmon lived two centuries after Rahab (Ruth 4:20, at the end of the period of the judges; no wife is here listed for Salmon). According to the Talmud (*b. Megillah* 14b–15a), Rahab is the wife of Joshua. Her anomalous presence, along with that of Tamar, Ruth, the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba), and Mary, has been explained by several theories.

The early Christian male writers traditionally known as the church fathers argued that the women represent sinners redeemed by Jesus. However, according to contemporaneous Jewish and Christian literature, the women were regarded not as sinners but as manifesting righteousness. Although all five women lack direct contact from

heaven — the deity does not appear to Tamar. Rahab, Ruth, or Bathsheba, and according to Matthew, the heavenly messages come not to Mary but to Joseph — to view them as sinners associates women with sin in a way that is absent from the Gospel.

The women's various unexpected sexual activities — Rahab is a prostitute (although she is never depicted engaging in any sort of sexual act); Tamar poses as a prostitute and seduces her father-in-law; Ruth, of Moabite origins and therefore associated with incest (see Gen 19:30–38), has a possibly incestuous meeting with Boaz on the threshing floor; and Bathsheba, while married to Uriah, conceives a child with David — may be seen to anticipate Joseph's concern with Mary's pregnancy and, perhaps, to serve as responses to claims of Jesus' illegitimacy.

Although their inclusion in the conventional pattern of the genealogy implies that they lived in traditional domestic arrangements, not one of the women is identified as married at the time of her child's conception; thus a trace of independence, if not subversive status, remains. In this perspective, the women can represent members of the community associated with the author of the Gospel of Matthew: independent of biological families and seen as potentially disruptive by those on the outside. Moreover, they are also to some extent independent of their natal communities; Tamar is inappropriately housed in her father's house, since she is legally a member of Judah's family; Rahab survives the destruction of Jericho; Ruth leaves Moab; and Bathsheba is identified as the wife of Uriah, the Hittite who fights for the Israelite king. So too will Mary be forced to leave her home in Bethlehem and relocate first to Egypt and then to Nazareth in Galilee.

In their willingness to act and to move, the women may also indicate the higher righteousness that Matthew frequently endorses: Rahab acts righteously in order to save the spies sent by Joshua, just as Tamar forces Judah to act; Ruth motivates Boaz, and Bathsheba, here identified as "she of Uriah," recollects the Hittite's fidelity while David

stayed home at the time when kings go off to war. Joseph, the major actor in the infancy account, also subverts expectation: "being a righteous man" (Matt 1:19), he had resolved to divorce Mary quietly. Yet he is convinced by an angelic dream to marry.

Rahab is, finally, the first Gentile clearly mentioned in the genealogy. Ruth, too, is a Gentile, and the ethnic origins of Tamar and Bathsheba were debated by Jews and Christians in the early centuries. Rahab thus may foreshadow the entry of Gentiles into the Matthean church. However, in Jewish literature of the period, Rahab, along with Ruth, was regarded as a righteous proselyte to Judaism.

SEE ALSO Part I: Bathsheba; Ruth; Tamar.
AMY-JILL LEVIN

RAHAB IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

(Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25)

Rahab, the prostitute who hid Joshua's spies from the authorities in Jericho, became an example of conversion in early Christianity and Judaism because she and her family escaped the ban on Jericho and continued to live in Israel "to this day" (Joshua 2:617, 23–25). She appears in the historical example lists of Hebrews, James, and the late-first-century letter called 1 *Clement*, to the Corinthians. In Heb 11:31, Rahab is presented as an example of faith, having "received the spies in peace," she escapes the fate of the unbelievers. The Epistle of James, which emphasizes the relationship between faith and works, offers her deed as an example of the works that show faith. In 1 *Clement*, she exemplifies faith and hospitality. This common emphasis on faith probably derives from the deduction that she became a proselyte, a view that also appears in a number of early Jewish commentaries.

MARY ROSE D'ANGELO

Rebecca

Greek transliteration of the Hebrew name Reḥekāh; the different spelling reflects the use of the double kappa for the Hebrew koph (q) as well as the English letter c for the Greek kappa.