

JOSHUA III

Joshua 2

The first step in preparing for the conquest of Canaan was reconnaissance. Moses had sent spies into the land thirty-eight years earlier, entrusting them with the task of checking out the Promised Land in its entirety. These spies had a much narrower mission - to reconnoiter the site of the first battle - the walled city of Jericho.

THE SPIES ENTER THE CITY (verse 1)

The use of spies was common in the Ancient Near East, as documents from the period attest. When we compare this mission with the earlier one sent by Moses, we find a few notable differences that go beyond the scope of the assignment. First of all, the spies were sent secretly. Spy missions, of course, are always intended to be kept secret from the enemy, but it appears that this one was kept secret from the Israelites as well; undoubtedly Joshua remembered the brouhaha associated with the earlier endeavor of which he had been a part. Secondly, only two spies are sent rather than twelve, probably due to the significantly smaller target area for the mission. Thirdly, the names of the spies are not given. But the procedure described in selecting the spies for the earlier mission would suggest that they were men of great repute in the land. Could one have been Salmon, the son of Nahshon, a prince of Judah (Numbers 7:12), the man who later married Rahab? We have no way of knowing, of course, but the possibility is intriguing.

The location of Shittim is unknown, but scholars generally assume that it was an outpost on the east bank of the Jordan across from Jericho. The city of Jericho, considered by many to be the oldest inhabited city on the planet (some archaeologists date artifacts as early as the ninth millennium BC), was in a strategic location, guarding the only reliable ford across the Jordan between the Dead Sea and the fords of Adam below the Jabbok more than twenty miles to the north. It also was in a position to guard the trade route through the Jordan Valley and the main road into the mountains leading to Bethel and Jerusalem. Jericho also was an oasis, with springs of water coming from the ground, which in the Dead Sea region is of great value. At this time Jericho was probably a city of about two thousand inhabitants, along with dependent villagers in the outlying regions.

When the spies entered the city, they went to the house of a prostitute named Rahab. This is not as unusual a choice as one might originally think, since in the ancient world prostitutes also served as innkeepers. The connection between such places and espionage was so well-known that the Code of Hammurabi specifies that any innkeeper (a cognate of the same word used here) who was caught harboring spies without reporting them to the king was to be put to death. Rahab's house would therefore be a logical place for strangers to blend in, and also a place where all the town gossip could be heard and information gathered to fulfill the spies' mission.

THE SPIES ARE DISCOVERED AND PROTECTED (verses 2-7)

Given what we later learn about the fear of the approaching Israelites, however, one should not be surprised that the city watch would have noted the arrival of two strangers.

Verse 2 - The attempt at covert reconnaissance failed, and the watch reported the presence of the spies to the king. Note that the term *king* here may have a variety of meanings. We are not talking about the monarch of an extensive domain. He is either the ruler of an independent city-state or the representative of a larger coalition (we see that these existed in other accounts in the book of Joshua) entrusted with the security of this important town.

Verse 3 - Given the occupation of prostitutes noted above and the connection of inns with espionage activities, one should not be surprised that Rahab's house would be the first place the king would look.

Verses 4-6 - Rahab protects the spies by lying about their identity, their movements, and their whereabouts. She hides them under stalks of flax drying on the flat roof of her house (those who know such things note that damp flax would make a very uncomfortable hiding place because of its odor), and keeps the soldiers from searching the house by emphasizing the need for haste in their pursuit to keep the spies from getting away.

Much is made of this passage because of Rahab's lie, and the account is often used to justify lying under certain circumstances. But we should note that lying is not the only issue here; she also committed treason by aiding and abetting the enemies of her people - a crime that, as we have already seen, carried the death penalty. How should we assess these actions? Note the following:

- The major reason for the controversy is the fact that Rahab is rewarded for her actions by the Israelites, and later praised for them in the New Testament (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25). But note carefully that the action for which she is praised is protecting the spies - what the rulers of Jericho would have called treason. In both passages, this is seen as an act of faith; because she trusted in the true God, she threw in her lot with His people rather than with the pagans who were under God's judgment. In other words, she recognized a higher loyalty, and acted accordingly - "we ought to obey God rather than men."
- Her lie is never praised, though some would argue that it is inseparable from the act of treason since it was the means by which she protected the spies. Explanations vary:
 - Rahab's lie was justifiable because it was in defense of human life. This is the most common explanation among those who would support Rahab's actions, and argue further that lies in defense of life are always justifiable.
 - Rahab's lie was justifiable because "all is fair in love and war," i.e., the conventions of war include the expectation of deception. Since Rahab had thrown in her lot with the Israelites, she was in fact fighting on their side, and could legitimately deceive the "enemy."

- Others argue that men and women of faith often sin in the process of putting their faith into action, but the fact that God uses such sins for good does not in any way justify them. Who, for instance, would seek to argue that all the actions of Jephthah and Samson were justifiable, despite the fact that both are listed among the men of faith in Hebrews 11:32?
- The bottom line is that God is Truth, and cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). Because morality involves conformity to the nature of God, lying may not in any way be justified. It is even more inappropriate to use Rahab's lie to justify the lies of others.

Verse 7 - Pursuit in the direction of the fords of the Jordan would be logical. Note also that the care given to locking the city gates at night was appropriate under the threat of war or invasion. The consequence, of course, was that the spies were also locked *in*, and thus trapped in a hostile city.

RAHAB'S COVENANT WITH THE SPIES (verses 8-21)

The conversation between Rahab and the spies serves as the centerpiece of the chapter, and was clearly the aspect of the story that the author thought most important.

Verses 8-9 - Rahab goes up to the roof where the spies are hiding (presumably this occurred before the soldiers arrived) and tells them about the mood of the city. The people are living in fear. This had been predicted as far back as the Song of Miriam (Exodus 15:15-16). Other documents from the period speak of their kings and armies striking fear into the hearts of their enemies, but this is a rare example of such a testimony in the mouth of one of those enemies rather than simply as a typical rhetorical boast that characterized the self-promotion of most ancient monarchs. Rahab also gives personal testimony to her faith in the God of Israel. She is sure that He will be victorious, though the bedraggled spies hiding in her soggy flax could hardly have inspired her with confidence. This willingness to put her faith into action is the primary reason she is praised in Hebrews and James.

Verses 10-11 - Morale is low because word has reached the inhabitants of the exploits of Israel's God, both in the crossing of the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptian army a generation earlier and in the recent defeats of Sihon and Og (note that the word translated here as *completely destroyed* is the Hebrew word *herem*, or *ban*, which implies the utter destruction of an enemy as an act of sacrifice to a deity; we will discuss this in detail later in the course). Rahab here continues her confession of faith by identifying the God of Israel as the God of the entire universe. We have no idea how Rahab may have obtained her knowledge, both of Israel's history and of their God; this would have been completely contrary to the understanding of the nature of deity in which she had been raised. The Canaanites thought of gods as local, devoted to a single tribe, and were convinced that when tribes made war, their gods were also fighting against one another. Rahab now knows better, and has no doubt that the God of the heavens and the earth will win the coming battle.

Verses 12-13 - Rahab here negotiates for her own life and the lives of her family members (no husband or children here; she is, after all, a prostitute). This is another indication of her confidence in an Israelite victory. She looks to the God of Israel to protect her rather than the rulers of her own city.

Verse 14 - The spies agree, swearing a solemn oath in the name of the Lord. The oath is conditional, noting that it depends on Rahab's silence. We should not think here that the spies didn't trust Rahab - after all, she had saved their lives. They are simply emphasizing the importance of her silence for her own sake; if she allows one stray word to escape her lips, she puts her own life in jeopardy, and no one will be able to save her. The implication is that the spies will see that she is treated kindly and fairly if she manages to live that long.

Verse 15 - She lets them down by a rope from her window to enable them to escape from the secured city. Much evidence exists for the building of houses along city walls, including in later ruins at Jericho itself. In some cases, the intent was to fortify the city walls by building structures that would have walls perpendicular to the outer defenses in order to brace them more firmly; in other cases, the outer walls of the houses themselves were built contiguously, thus forming the city wall. Houses at that time were commonly two stories high, so that the drop would not have been a large one (unless the wall overlooked a ravine at the edge of the tel). Windows, for obvious reasons, would have been on the upper floor if the house had any windows at all.

Verse 16 - Rahab's advice here is interesting. The hills in which the spies were told to hide were to the west of Jericho - the opposite direction from that taken by their pursuers. The region is rugged and rocky, and was long the refuge of bandits (this area was the setting for the Parable of the Good Samaritan). The advice to hide for three days also corresponds to a document from the era, the Hittite *Instructions to the Commander of the Border Fortress*, which specifies that suspicious characters are to be pursued for three days, after which the search is to be given up (and failure punished by the authorities). Three days was thus considered a safe time interval, after which the spies could re-cross the Jordan and return to camp.

Verses 17-20 - Further conditions are stipulated before the spies leave Rahab's house. Not only must she maintain secrecy, but she must also mark her house with a scarlet cord at the time of the invasion, and gather all her family members inside; otherwise, the spies cannot guarantee their safety (note that the spies had no idea of what would later happen to the walls of Jericho). These conditions are reminiscent of the Passover, when the blood of the sacrificial lamb was painted on the doorposts and lintel of each house, and the inhabitants were commanded to remain inside when the Angel of Death passed over the land (though commentators who suggest that the cord is red to represent the blood of Christ go beyond any symbolism affirmed by Scripture). Others have suggested that Rahab, like Noah and Lot on earlier occasions, may have pleaded with the citizens of her town to enter the safety of her house, but failed to convince them, as they chose to ignore her predictions of doom and "eat, drink, and be merry" until judgment fell upon them. Such speculation has no foundation in the text and in fact would have been contrary to the need for silence; we have no indication that Rahab sought to protect anyone outside her extended family.

Verse 21 - Rahab agrees to the conditions and sends the spies away. She wastes no time hanging the cord from her window. Some have noted that the cord must not have been an unusual decoration for her house, since if that were the case it might have attracted suspicion and defeated the very purpose of the pact she made with the spies.

THE SPIES REPORT TO JOSHUA (verses 22-24)

The spies follow Rahab's instructions, waiting in the mountains toward the west until the pursuers return from their fruitless search. They then ford the Jordan, return to Joshua and give their report. Note that the intelligence gathered from Rahab was exactly what the Israelites needed. They now knew that God had paved the way for their invasion by undermining the morale of the people of the land, enabling them to approach battle with confidence (God later provided Gideon with similar assurance on the eve of his battle with the Midianites in Judges 7:9-15).

In this chapter, Rahab is not only an example of faith in action, but is also a picture of the marvelous grace of God. Not only did she belong to a people condemned to destruction, but she was an immoral woman as well, yet God changed her heart, saved her life, incorporated her into His people (cf. Joshua 6:25), and actually made her an ancestress of Christ Himself (Matthew 1:5; note that she was also the mother of Boaz, the husband of Ruth).