Rahab and Her Visitors: Reciprocal Deliverance

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Perched on the geographical and literary edge of Canaan, the narrative in Josh 2 recounts a spy mission, as Joshua sends two Israelites to reconnoiter this "promised land" ahead of the Israelite entry into it via Jericho. While the story begins expectedly, the plot quickly twists unexpectedly, as Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute, aids and abets the spies in their escape from the Jericho authorities. Situated as part of the introduction to the so-called Conquest Narrative, this story relates another episode in the ever-present "us" versus "them" of the Old Testament: Israelite versus Canaanite; as the descriptor indicates, the Israelites understand themselves to be the conquerors. Joshua 2, together with a second episode briefly narrated in Josh 6:15–25, depicts the Israelites, however, by means of these two dispatched by Joshua, in a rather different light. Interrogating the identity of these two Israelites as spies, spokesmen, or stooges opens two particular interpretive avenues: first, reexamining the Old Testament holy war tradition in light of the actions of the two men and, second, reading Josh 2 as an inversion, a parody of the "spy story" genre. These two interpretive explorations offer an alternative framework by which to read the violence of this "Conquest Narrative" and reveal that when the people of God set out to exclude, they are the ones who wind up looking the fools.

Who are the heroes and who are the saviors in the story of Rahab? There are spies who do not spy and messengers with no message, but the Israelites end up hearing their own theology preached to them from an "outsider." Joshua 2 is a story where all the lines are blurred.

INTERROGATING IDENTITY: "MESSENGERS" AND "SPIES"

The three references to the spies/spokesmen/stooges occurring in the brief second Rahab narrative of Josh 6 (17, 22, 25) point to the complicated history of the Rahab tradition. Like Josh 2:1, 6:22 calls the men "spies" (מרנלים). In contrast to Josh 2, which knows these men only as "spies," however, the Hebrew of 6:17 refers to them as "messengers" (מלאכים). Joshua 6:25 Masoretic Hebrew Bible (MT), with its reference to the "messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho," represents a conflation or harmonization of the variants. The translators of the Septuagint (LXX) already recognized the difficulty when they either omit the entire clause with the reference to the tradition ("because she [Rahab] hid the messengers that we sent," v. 17, or translate the term for "messengers" as "spies," v. 25). Some scholars argue for the priority of the Hebrew text and explain the omissions in verses 17 and 25, along with those in verse 22—where the LXX does not reproduce the references to "the land" or to "the prostitute," or the clause "just as you promised her"—mechanically as cases of haplography.[1] This explanation fails to account for the fact that the omissions, and the translation variant in verse 25, involve precisely the information that complicates the relationship between Josh 2 and 6, namely the designation "messengers" and the comment that their mission was "to spy out the land."[2] Others see these textual differences not as LXX omissions, but as MT expansions of an older text and tradition,[3] although it is difficult to determine the motive for a Hebrew scribe to transform spies into messengers, to reiterate Rahab's status, or to reintroduce the notion that their original mission extended beyond Jericho. From this perspective, the omissions in the LXX represent a harmonization that eliminates any reference to messengers or to a failed espionage mission.

REEXAMINING THE OLD TESTAMENT HOLY WAR TRADITION

The depiction of the men sent to Jericho as "messengers" raises intriguing questions concerning the internal consistency of the broader biblical "holy war" tradition. In Josh 6:17, Joshua refers to the men as "the messengers we sent," but the verse does not indicate the contents of their embassy. Indeed, while messengers in the Old Testament typically deliver their messages as such, with attribution and employing the so-called "messenger formula," the note in Josh 6 omits any reference to the message itself—either in the commissioning or the execution of the mission. What might have been the contents of such a message? Elsewhere in the conquest story, as perhaps not coincidentally in the episode Rahab cites in her

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[1] Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 203–204. Boling and Wright attribute the LXX translation of מלאכים as "spies" in verse 25 to the influence of the subsequent verb.

[2] LXX may omit "the prostitute" and "just as you promised her" in verse 22 as embarrassing or unnecessary details.

[3] Trent Butler, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 66–67.

speech, Israel (Num 21:21)/Moses (Deut 2:26) sent messengers to Sihon, king of the Amorites, requesting safe passage through his territory. Deuteronomy 2 goes so far as to describe the contents of the message the men delivered as "words of peace," in apparent contradiction to what one might expect in the context of Israel's holy war tradition, as is the outcome of the encounter between these Israelite messengers/spies and Rahab.

Is it conceivable that Deut 2:23–29—and Josh 6:17—reflect the stipulations for "holy war" recorded in Deut 20 but in keeping with an alternative reading of the Deuteronomic legislation? According to the customary analysis of 20:10–18, it distinguishes between distant cities (20:10–15), which were subject to greater latitude, and near cities (20:16–18), which Israel was obligated to eradicate entirely. "Another analysis, offered as early as Talmudic times (Talmud Jer *Shevi'ith* 6:1) and later strongly defended by Nachmanides, among others, however, divides the unit"[4] into three sections: the offer of peace to be made to all enemies and the policy for treating those who accept (20:10–11), and policies for dealing with cities who rebuff the peace offer, distant and nearby, respectively (20:12–15, 16–18). Noting that verse 15, which restricts the application of the provisions outlined in verses 10–14 to distant cities, appears awkwardly in the middle of the legislation and in an awkward syntax, Rofé has argued that the call for *herem* ("the Ban," NRSV, commonly, "utterly destroy") in chapter 20 is secondary.[5] The account in Deut 2 reflects the possibility of offering peace to distant enemies, but accommodates this offer of peace with its overall program calling for the eradication of the inhabitants of the land by means of the "heart-hardening" motif. Moses offered peace, to be sure, but God used the offer as an opportunity to "harden [Sihon's] spirit and make [his] heart obstinate" (2:30). Sihon brought the pursuant utter annihilation on himself and his people, "men, women, and children" (2:34).

Yair Hoffman has pointed, in fact, to texts in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and the remainder of the Deuteronomistic History (DH) that suggest "that the *herem* ('the Ban') is a concept typical only of some passages in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua; it is not a presupposition of the entire Deuteronomistic work."[6] Deuteronomy 12:29–30, for example, assumes the survival of individual Canaanites even after the annihilation of the Canaanite nations. Deuteronomy 7:20 anticipates the gradual displacement of the Canaanites; verse 22 comments that Israel could not destroy the Canaanites at once, in any case, since to do so would risk being overrun by exploding populations of wild animals. The (historically more reliable) depiction of Israel's gradual possession of the land and its long-term coexistence with

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[4]Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2003) 316.

[5]A. Rofé, "The Laws of Warfare in the Book of Deuteronomy: Their Origins, Intent and Positivity," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32 (1985) 23–44; see also R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 353 n. 86; and M. Rose, *Der Ausschließlichkeitsanspruch Jahwes: Deuteronomische Schultheologie und Volksfrømmigkeit in der späten Kønigszeit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1975) 111–123.

[6]Yair Hoffman, "The Deuteronomistic Concept of the Herem," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 111 (1999) 201.

Canaanites in Josh 13–19 and in Judges (where it is the dominant model[7]) conflicts with the description of *herem* in many portions of Joshua. Joshua 23:12–13 mentions the "rest of these remaining nations." Finally, the Deuteronomistic History apart from Joshua and Judges does not mention the *herem*.

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Joshua 11:19–20 also has the notion that Joshua's military campaigns against the inhabitants of the land resulted from their refusals to "[make] peace with Israel," complying with Nachmanides's less militaristic reading of Deut 20 as a background. It may also bear indirect testimony to a version of Deut 20 that lacked the *herem* material. Notably, Josh 11 does not make the awkward distinction between "near" and "far" cities, and Josh 12:1–4 includes Sihon and Og in the list of "kings of the land" (and thus presumably "near") "whom the people of Israel defeated." As in the Deut 2 account of the defeats of these two "kings of the land," the refusals of peace mentioned in Josh 11:19 were "the Lord's doing to harden their hearts" (11:20). Only the Gibeonites, in a manner described in Josh 9 as a subterfuge, avoided the common fate. Perhaps not coincidentally, they too invoked Sihon as a precedent (9:10). The designation "messengers" then serves to group Rahab together with the Gibeonites as the Canaanites whom God spared from the hardened heart.

NOT MESSENGERS AND NOT SPIES EITHER

As the identity of the Israelite men in Josh 6 continues to shift between "messengers" and "spies," they emerge, as noted above, as neither. They carry no message from Joshua to the king of Jericho and while they return with words from one who intends them to be in aid of negotiating a peace, it is a peace very unlike that envisaged in Deut 20. As spies, they glean no intelligence from their own efforts, they only "spy out" the inside of a brothel and a portion of the city wall, and their presence in the city is known, it would seem, almost instantly upon arrival. Their words upon their return, alongside failing as a message negotiating terms of peace with the city, also fail as a report of intelligence gathered in a mission of reconnoitering Jericho.

Messengers *sans* message and spies *sans* intelligence are merely the beginning in a list of multiple narrative "dead ends" in Josh 2, details that should impact the unfolding narrative, but instead either dissipate as the narrative unfolds or do not subsequently emerge as being of any consequence. In a spy story, if the spies are not

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[7]Regarding the problem of the so-called "Negative List of Possessions" in Judges and the multiple rationales offered in Judges concerning the continued presence of Canaanites in post-conquest Israel, see Mark E. Biddle, *Reading Judges: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2012) 19–21, 28–30, and 36–39.

going to return successfully with a report, it is expected of them that they will die being pursued or be caught in a desperate attempt to escape the pursuit. In Josh 2, the pursuit is not a tension-creating, nail-biting plot element, but is instead a peripheral distraction that unceremoniously and abruptly ends in verse 7 when the city gate slams behind the pursuers. Their return in verse 22 reads not as a triumph for the two Israelites, but instead as an unnecessary epilogue to a pointless chapter.

Rahab asks the men for a sign of good faith, and they reply with an oath that is equal parts threat and promise; Rahab obtains no real sign, but is instead left holding a single red cord as the only protection between her and the wall-tumbling fate that imminently awaits her city. Furthermore, in this threat/promise of the Israelite men, they demand her secrecy, an irony both in the face of the deception she has successfully perpetrated on their behalf thus far and of their own utter failure at achieving secrecy. From a narrative point of view, this demand is another "dead end," as the immediate question arises, "Whom would she tell and why would she tell them?" And even if she did "tell," how would telling in any way impact the events of the visit of the now-departed spies/messengers and the outcome of events in Jericho? A final narrative "dead end" to consider is the spies themselves, as they too peter out in anonymity, without the names or the promises that successful spies are awarded. Joshua 2 is strangely a story in which "nothing" really happens—there is no spying, no spy report, no suspenseful chase scene, no hard-fought negotiation for one's life, and, finally, for the spies/messengers, there is no legacy.

It's a Genre Fail

Joshua 6:17 and 22–25 carries these men on a literary journey from being first "spokesmen" (i.e., messengers, v. 17), then spies (v. 22), then, in a conflation/harmonization of the two roles, "spying messengers" (v. 25). This section of Josh 6, while brief, introduces numerous interpretive possibilities as to the role of the men. As messengers, the men could follow the pattern set forth in Deut 2 and 20 to be emissaries of the Israelites ready to offer terms of peace to the city of Jericho, the first city in Canaan the Israelites are poised to conquer. As spies, they follow in an already established tradition of Israelites sent to reconnoiter the land, Joshua himself amongst that previous company of Israelites sent to spy out the land. To describe the men as "messengers" Joshua sent to "spy" out Jericho introduces yet another possibility that combines these two otherwise independent roles.

While Josh 6 describes the men in a complex arrangement of "messenger," "spy," and "messengers who spy," the brief text offers no expansion of narrative to explicate the complexity. Joshua 2 offers significant narrative expansion, but does not offer explication of any complexity of the role, situating the men *only* as spies. The seeming simplicity of the men as spies and spies only, however, belies an underlying complexity of genre. Already they have been established as spies in a spy story in which "nothing" happens. Joshua 2 further presents the two men as spies

in a spy story that is not actually a spy story, but is rather an inversion of a spy story—a parody of the genre in which the would-be spies are reduced to buffoons—stooges who are unable to carry out even the first step in a successful spy mission, as they infiltrate, not the land, but a brothel.

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As spies who do not spy and messengers who deliver no message, the two Israelite men as portrayed in Josh 2 emerge ultimately in their true guise: stooges. And as they disappear behind the doors of the brothel, Rahab appears before them and before us as the true hero of this spy story. The emergence of the identity of the men as stooges is simultaneous with the emergence of Rahab as their savior. Thus, in Josh 2, in an inversion of the spy story genre, the portrayal of the men as spies in a failed mission flattens the characters into caricatures: buffoons, bumblers who are merely the tools of a savvier operator, and the narrative shifts its focus away from the men and onto their savior instead. They may be Joshua's spokesmen or spies, but they are certainly Rahab's stooges. In depicting the Israelite men this way, the editorial workings[8] in the Rahab story ultimately shift the focus away from the men—spokesmen, spies, or stooges—and place it on the Canaanite prostitute.[9]

RAHAB'S SPEECH

In a manner similar to the ways in which the identity of Rahab's visitors shifts in unexpected ways throughout her story, Rahab's own identity as Canaanite prostitute is recast as a quintessential Deuteronomistic preacher in her speech to the Israelites spies (Josh 2:9–13), a complex of phrases and references found in various DH texts and thus, thick with Deuteronomistic theology.

Even from the beginning of her speech, Rahab quotes almost verbatim from Miriam's Song in Exod 15: "the dread of you has fallen on us" (Josh 2:9; cf. Exod 15:16) and "all the inhabitants…melt in fear" (Josh 2:9; cf. Exod 15:15). As noted above, Rahab's words call upon the Deuteronomic version of the account of the

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[8]"The word ['messengers'] is used only here with reference to the spies. Along with disjunctive syntax, all this suggests that activity of a redactor bringing together the largely preformed story units"; Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, 210.

[9]For further reading on Josh 2 as parody, the narrative's comic features, and the figure of Rahab in it, see Melissa A. Jackson, "Rahab, Comedy, and Feminist Interpretation," *Oxford Biblical Studies Online: Focus On Series*, http://global.oup.com/obso/focus/focus_on_rahab/ (accessed April 18, 2017); F. Scott Spencer, "Those Riotous—Yet Righteous—Foremothers of Jesus: Exploring Matthew's Comic Genealogy," in *Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Biblical Worlds*, ed. Athalya Brenner (London: T&T Clark, 2003) 7–30; and Yair Zakovitch, "Humor and Theology or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Literary-Folkloric Approach to Joshua 2," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. Susan Niditch (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990) 75–98.

defeats of Sihon and Og, whom Israel "utterly destroyed" (Josh 2:10; Deut 3:6). This reference to Sihon and Og, which shares language with Josh 5:1 ("the kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan" and "our hearts melted, and there was no courage left"), introduces a precedent for the possibility that Israel's conquest need not mean the total eradication of the native population. Next, Rahab makes a confession worthy of the Deuteronomistic prologue to Deuteronomy (4:39) and King Solomon (1 Kings 8:23), the only other two occurrences of the phrase, when she proclaims YHWH to be "God in heaven above and on earth below." Rahab's solicitation of *hesed* for *hesed* ("deal kindly," Josh 2:13) recalls a similar promise made to a resident of Luz by spies from the house of Joseph ("and we will do *hesed* with you," Judg 1:24) when he showed them how to gain entry into the city. Indeed, this parallel may provide a clue as to an earlier form of the Rahab/spies tradition "which attributed it to a betrayal from within by Rahab, rather than to the miraculous intervention narrated in chapter 6."[10] In this case, the spies will have, in fact, accomplished their objective—to gain entry into the city with the assistance of a native accomplice.

CONCLUSION: THE DANGER OF LOOKING THE FOOL

A typical reading of the Conquest Narrative focuses on the genocide, just as a typical reading of Josh 2 focuses on salvation for Rahab and her family. To understand genocide as the model and mode by which the Israelites took possession of Canaan is to overemphasize the exclusionary feature of the "conquest" narrative and ignore inclusionary strands, not only in Joshua but throughout the Old Testament. God called Joshua's ancestor Abraham to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. Joshua 2 reminds its readers that eradication is not a blessing. Joshua 2 also reminds its readers that these nations can bring blessing to Abraham's descendants. Beyond physical deliverance, sadly and ironically, these stooges needed Rahab's help in order to fulfill Abraham's call.

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Who saves whom in this story, then? In this striking text, Israel learns that a Deuteronomistic-sermon-preaching Canaanite prostitute can deliver them, even as they make plans for her future deliverance. All expectation is upended. There is no longer a distinction between who is savior and who is saved.

Joshua 2 reveals the inherent contradiction between bringing blessing to the world and excluding the world. Exclusion is not a blessing. As the church confronts

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[10]Bernard P. Robinson, "Rahab of Canaan—and Israel," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 23 (2009) 259.

the bisection of the world into camps of "us" and "them," Josh 2 canonizes an outsider who breaches such walls of separation. Surrounded by a narrative focused on violence and exclusion, Josh 2 tells a story of extraordinary, reciprocal deliverance. The task of the church is to be vigilant of the places and ways in which we build walls between "us" and "them." In a pluralistic society, the church cannot arrogantly assume that the other has no blessing to offer. Rahab and the Israelites delivered each other. ⊕

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