

## **Rahab and the Spies** An Exegetical Evaluation of Joshua 2

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Part 2 of 2

### **STEP-BY-STEP EXEGESIS**

Intrinsic analysis of a Hebrew prose passage is not enough. As Tremper Longman reminds us, “a literary analysis is only a partial analysis. It is best taken as an aspect of the historical-grammatical approach to the text.”<sup>1</sup> Observing the Hebrew narrative conventions such as character development, scenes, and plot structure highlights aspects of Joshua 2 that might otherwise go unnoticed. These literary devices help us maintain expositional integrity as we seek to discover responsible applications for the modern audience.

In order to proceed with our examination of the original intention of the biblical author, we will anatomize each of the five episodic literary units or phases. This approach will begin by establishing each phase’s original meaning, and then present responsible and legitimate contemporary applications for each of the five phases.

**PHASE ONE (PROBLEM):** *Joshua sends out the spies (2:1)*

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1 THEN Joshua the son of Nun sent two men as spies secretly from Shittim, saying, “Go, view the land, especially Jericho.” So they went and came into the house of a harlot whose name was Rahab, and lodged there.

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The author initiates the action of the narrative through the character of Joshua. Chapter 1 describes the transference of the people’s loyalty from Moses to Joshua, who is God’s appointed successor as leader over Israel. This opening verse of chapter 2 enhances

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<sup>1</sup> Silva, *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, 140.

the status of Joshua as leader and as “chief of military operations” for the upcoming conquest of Canaan. But the Hebrew syntax in the author’s opening assertion raises an important question regarding the interpretation of this verse which could bias the exposition of the balance of the chapter.

The Hebrew phrase, **מְרַגְלִים סְתֵרָא** (lit. “ones spying secretly”) calls into question the relationship between the participle **מְרַגְלִים** (“spying”) and the adverb **סְתֵרָא** (“secretly”). The adverb “secretly” could modify either the participle “spying” or the imperfect verb **וַיִּשְׁלַח** (“and he sent”), the first Hebrew word in the sentence. In other words, did Joshua send the spies secretly, or did Joshua send them to spy secretly?

The NIV translates the adverb as modifying **וַיִּשְׁלַח**: “Then Joshua son of Nun **secretly sent** two spies from Shittim.” This rendering suggests *how* Joshua sent the spies: he sent them secretly, without anyone other than himself knowing that they had left the camp. The NRSV has a similar reading: “Then Joshua son of Nun **sent two men secretly** from Shittim as spies.” The disposition to allow “secretly” to modify the verb implies that Joshua was hiding this fact from the rest of the Israelites. After the divine bestowal of Moses’ mantle of leadership upon Joshua in Chapter 1, his hiding the mission of spies from the Israelites throws some confusion on Joshua’s character and role as guide for the nation.

The NASB also appears to agree with the NIV and NRSV: “Then Joshua the son of Nun sent two men **as spies secretly** from Shittim.” The NASB translates the participle **מְרַגְלִים** with a noun (“spies”) and inserts the particle “as” in front of it. This version seems to fall in line with the NIV and NRSV translations, and refers to *how* Joshua sent the spies.

The NKJV takes the opposite approach, translating the adverb **סְתֵרָא** (“secretly”) as modifying the participle **מְרַגְלִים** (“spying”). The NKJV reads: “Now Joshua son of Nun sent out two men from Acacia Grove **to spy secretly**.” This particular translation describes *how* the spying was to be accomplished. The two spies were to execute their sortie secretly when they were in enemy-held territory. Joshua had given them a consequential assignment, and the success of their mission depended upon their remaining undetected by the Canaanites.

As stated previously, what one concludes from this syntactical question will effect one’s reading and ultimately one’s understanding of this entire chapter. Was Joshua afraid, doubting and faithless in sending the spies into Canaan, or was Joshua astute, cautious and courageous in sending out his men? These are the two questions now confronting us!

Overall scriptural characterization of Joshua and Hebrew syntax should inform our choice between these two options. From a syntactical viewpoint the proximity of the word חָרַשׁ (“secretly”) to the participle מְרַגְלִים (“spying”) seems to indicate that חָרַשׁ modifies the ones doing the spying. Unfortunately, חָרַשׁ is used only this one time in the entire Old Testament, so any comparison of how it is used with other participles or within other phrases is unavailable. A much stronger case can be made for the contextual characterization of Israel’s newly mandated leader.

The traits of fear, doubt or faithlessness are not in keeping with the idealization of Joshua’s character within the book of Joshua, or in the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Remember, Joshua was one of the spies originally sent to explore Canaan by Moses (Num. 13:1-16), and he was one of only two men who returned with a courageous and faithful report (Num. 13:30; 14:6-8). In Exodus 17 Moses chooses Joshua as the military commander to lead Israel in battle against the Amalekites. This biblical record of Joshua portrays him as the consummate leader, faithful to Moses, faithful in leading God’s covenant people and faithful to his God. There is no corroboration in any biblical accounts to suppose Joshua was motivated by either fear or doubt, or was lacking in faith, but just the opposite has been recorded.

As Moses displayed wisdom and prudence in sending out the twelve spies in Numbers 13, so Joshua displayed wisdom and prudence in sending out the two spies in Joshua 2. John Lange concurs with this assertion, “The use of human prudence, with all trust in divine providence, is not only allowable, but often also a binding duty. Joshua ought not, in his position as general, to enter a strange and hostile land, without having explored it first. He proceeded in full conformity with the example of Moses in Numbers XIII.”<sup>2</sup>

A second question arises in Scene 2 in regards to the morphology of זֹנֶה. The men entered the city and ended up in the house of a prostitute (זֹנָה) named Rahab. Again, the understanding of this word, if left unresolved, could bias the balance of the story.

Was Rahab a prostitute or merely an innkeeper? D.J. Wiseman proposes that the meaning of the word here and in other Old Testament contexts may suggest “one who conducts friendly dealings with alien persons.” He also draws a comparison with the role of the Old Babylonian *sabitu*, “one who gives drink,” and various laws regarding inns from earlier law codes.<sup>3</sup> (The NIV, by way of footnote, includes *innkeeper*, as an alternative translation for זֹנָה.)

<sup>2</sup> John P. Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1871), 22.

<sup>3</sup> D.J. Wiseman, “Rahab of Jericho,” *TynB* 14 (1964), 8-11.

However, the lexical form of זֹנֶה is the verb זָנָה, which is used predominately in the Old Testament as a broad term for sexual misconduct of many sorts, including adultery, fornication and prostitution. In addition, when זֹנֶה is used as a participle and preceded by אִשָּׁה (“woman”), it refers unequivocally to a woman of prostitution (i.e. sex for hire).<sup>4</sup> And the name “Rahab” itself has suggestive sexual overtones. The basic meaning of רָחֵב is “breadth” or “width,” and possibly refers to female genitalia.<sup>5</sup> Along similar lines, Robert Boling presumes that רָחֵב is a shortened form of a sentence name: Rahab-N, “the God N has opened / widened (the womb?).”<sup>6</sup>

The historian Josephus and others have tried to water down the impropriety of these Israelite men entering a “house of ill-repute” by understanding זֹנֶה as meaning an innkeeper.<sup>7</sup> But זֹנֶה is clearly a technical term for “prostitute” in the Old Testament. John Calvin in his exposition on Joshua offers this comment on verse 1b: “Why some try to avoid the nam *harlot*, and interpret זֹנֶה as meaning *one who keeps an inn*, I see not, unless it be that they think it disgraceful to be the guests of a courtesan, or wish to wipe off a stigma from a woman who not only received the messengers kindly, but secured their safety by singular courage and prudence.”<sup>8</sup>

#### PHASE ONE: ORIGINAL IMPLICATION

The pre-monarchial audience would have had first-hand knowledge that what was promised concerning the conquest of Canaan had not been fully realized. God had raised up Moses to mediate His covenant and had elevated Joshua not only to mediate the covenant (Josh. 5.1-12; 8.30-35), but to deliver Israel from her enemies and to conquer

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<sup>4</sup> *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology & Exegesis, Vol. 4*, William A. Van Gemeren, gen. ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1224. The זֹנֶה may refer to either secular or cultic prostitute. The latter was an almost invariable element of Canaanite religious practice. The author, who may have wished to avoid ambiguity, does not use the term HEB for the cultic variety. Interpretations based on the notion that Rahab was a cultic prostitute are answered by Soggin, *Joshua*, 89.

<sup>5</sup> *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology & Exegesis, Vol. 4*, VanGemeren gen. ed., 1091.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Boling, *The Anchor Bible: Joshua* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1982), 145. In his explanation for the name, Rahab, Boling refers to Martin Noth’s comparison of the names Rehoboam and Rehabyahu, the latter being clearly a Yahwistic name on the same root.

<sup>7</sup> J. Alberto Soggin, *Joshua* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972) 36.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume IV* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 43.

Canaan (Num. 27:12-13; Deut. 31:1-8). As the successor to Moses, he was to recall the people to covenant obedience. Just as the first and second generation followed Moses and Joshua, so the original audience is required to follow God's chosen leaders in their day and time.

#### PHASE ONE: MODERN APPLICATION

Throughout the history of Old Testament Israel, God sovereignly placed men and women over the nation. They were appointed to mediate the covenant between God and His chosen people, and to lead them into their possession of the Promised Land. Moses, Joshua and David were paradigmatic leaders whom the people were to follow. But these men were only exemplary until the perfect leader of God's people and perfect custodian of the covenant would come, Jesus Christ. He is the mediator of the New Covenant, and he has been given authority over the church today (Matt. 28:18; Matt. 11:27), just as Joshua was given authority over Israel during the conquest.

With Christ's resurrection and ascension, His authority has been given to divinely appointed leaders within His church (Matt. 16:18; Acts 20:28). In the same way that the Israelites were to obey Joshua, God's people today are to obey those who rule over us in the church, submitting to their leadership, for they watch over our souls (Heb. 13:17).

The Westminster Longer Catechism in Question 127 outlines what the contemporary audience should aspire to as it seeks to obey its divinely appointed leaders:

“The honor which inferiors owe to their superiors is: all due reverence in heart, word, and behavior; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and graces; willing obedience to their lawful commands and counsels, due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defense and maintenance of their person and authority, according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities and covering them in love, so that they may be an honor to them and to their government.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Morton H. Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Confession and Catechisms* (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1993), 88.

**PHASE TWO (RISING ACTION): The Spies are detected (2:2-7)**

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2 And it was told the king of Jericho, saying, “Behold, men from the sons of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land.” 3 And the king of Jericho sent *word* to Rahab, saying, “Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land.” 4 But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, “Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. 5 “And it came about when *it was time* to shut the gate, at dark, that the men went out; I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them.” 6 But she had brought them up to the roof and hidden them in the stalks of flax which she had laid in order on the roof. 7 So the men pursued them on the road to the Jordan to the fords; and as soon as those who were pursuing them had gone out, they shut the gate.

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The second phase of the story finds the spies’ secrecy penetrated and made known to the enemy at the highest levels, the king of Jericho himself. He dispatches word to Rahab to turn over the spies to his men. Instead of revealing the location of the spies, Rahab chooses to conceal their whereabouts to the King’s men, whom she sends on a “wild-geese chase.”

Her “lie” saves these men, but the moral implication of her deceit has created intense debate throughout the history of the church. Augustine, Calvin, Charles Spurgeon and John Murray do not support “situational ethics,” the idea that under certain conditions we may justifiably lie.<sup>10</sup> So the appearance of willful deceit by Rahab in Joshua 2 awakens interesting ethical questions of truth-telling in Scripture.

In order to understand Rahab’s “lie,” we must first acknowledge the concept of holy war which is present in the passage. All the nations of the earth are to be ruled by God and owe their allegiance to Him. But since the Fall, not all human beings submit to His rule and conform to His justice. The salvific presence and blessings of God were uniquely concentrated on Israel. The coming of God’s reign is simultaneously the coming of His justice and the enforcement of His standards over all new people or new regions. The Israelite conquest of Canaan, through Holy War, is the establishment of God’s reign on earth.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Barnes, “Was Rahab’s Lie a Sin?”, RTR 54.1 (1995), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Vern Poythress, *The Shadow Christ in the Law of Moses* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 143.

Throughout the history of the world, nations have used intelligence-gathering as a necessary element in war. Strategic intelligence “evaluates information about the capabilities and intentions of foreign governments.”<sup>12</sup> Israel is no exception to this military maxim. In order for Israel to prepare herself for invasion, intelligence needed to be collected through reconnaissance, espionage and deception. The collection of information by spying was ordered by Moses (Num. 13), by Joshua (Josh. 2;7;14) and even by David (1 Sam. 26:4; 2 Sam. 10:3).

The tactic of spying demands guile and cunning on the part of the invading army and its leader. Joshua’s conduct in commissioning and sending spies is one of these necessary acts during wartime. Even today we accept that hunters use camouflage clothing, fishermen use lures and bait, and chess players mislead their opponents into capturing a weaker piece in order to capture a stronger one.

Are there other examples of how God’s people mislead others in Scripture? The Egyptian midwives received God’s blessing *after* they mislead Pharaoh (Ex. 1:19-20). The parents of Moses tricked the Egyptian authorities by hiding him for three months after his birth (Heb. 11:23). David used Hushai as a mole in conjunction with a network of spies (2 Sam. 15:32-27; 16:15-22). Jesus himself deceived his disciples in John 7:8 when he said that he would not go up to the feast, although later He did so secretly. Paul escaped the Jews under the cover of night (Acts 9:23-36). In all the aforementioned events we do not accuse the midwives, David, Paul and especially Jesus of acting according to an unethical principle that a right end justifies a wrong means. Neither do we argue that if two laws clash, the “higher law” must take precedent. Rather, we recognize that in such situations deception is legitimate, not wrong. In most of our day-to-day circumstances, lying is wrong ( Prov. 30:7-8) and truth is required ( Eph. 4:15). However, the Old Testament endorses the use of intelligence, counter-intelligence and decoys as part of Holy War.<sup>13</sup>

Some might admit this argument exonerates Joshua’s actions but ask, “Where does that leave Rahab, since she is a Canaanite, one who lives under the ‘ban’ and outside of the covenant community?” Phase 3 will develop this more fully, but Rahab had already declared her allegiance to the God of the Israelites when she was confronted by the King’s men. Consequently, she becomes a “fifth element” within Jericho. Hence, there are now not two spies within the city’s walls, but *three!* Her lies have become an indispensable part of Joshua’s opening move of vanquishing Canaan.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Encyclopedia Americana, Volume 15* (Danbury, CT: Grolier Inc., 1981), 246.

<sup>13</sup> *New Bible Commentary, “Joshua”* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 239.

## PHASE TWO: ORIGINAL IMPLICATION

As the covenant community perseveres in their conquest of Canaan, they are assured of divine protection wherever they might go and whatever they might do (Gen. 48:21; Ex. 3:13; Deut. 31:8,23). The inhabitants of the land will try to thwart their battle plans, but God will not leave them vulnerable and defenseless. Just as the spies found refuge on a dangerous excursion into enemy-occupied territory in the house of a Canaanite prostitute, so the Israelites will find protection wherever God-directed “holy war” carries them. Even in the most harrowing of circumstances, they should not be afraid (Gen. 28:15; Deut. 7:17), for not only will God not desert them, but He will consummate what He promised to do through them.

## PHASE TWO: MODERN APPLICATION

Christians today do not have to enter into enemy-held territory because all the world is under the control of the evil one (Matt. 13:37-43; Luke 4:5). Jesus describes the Church as light in a kingdom of darkness (Matt. 5:14-16). And because we are lights in a darkened world, He guarantees us that maltreatment and harrowment will come (Matt. 10:16-22), just as they fell upon him (Luke 17:25). But in the midst of these inevitable persecutions, the Lord also promises His presence, and His protection, and His power (John 14:16-18; Acts 1:8) to complete our conquest of the world by the spreading of the gospel. As Christ’s representatives we go confidently and boldly into enemy territory, “For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you’” (Heb. 13:5-6).

## PHASE THREE (TURNING POINT): Rahab reveals her faith (2:8-21)

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8 Now before they lay down, she came up to them on the roof, 9 and said to the men, “I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. 10 “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 who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. 11 “And when we heard *it*, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. 12 “Now therefore, please swear to me by the LORD, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father’s household, and give me a pledge of truth, 13 and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.”

14 So the men said to her, “Our life for yours if you do not tell this business of ours; and it shall come about when the LORD gives us the land that we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.”

15 Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the city wall, so that she was living on the wall. 16 And she said to them, “Go to the hill country, lest the pursuers happen upon you, and hide yourselves there for three days, until the pursuers return. Then afterward you may go on your way.”

17 And the men said to her, “We *shall be* free from this oath to you which you have made us swear, 18 unless, when we come into the land, you tie this cord of scarlet thread in the window through which you let us down, and gather to yourself into the house your father and your mother and your brothers and all your father’s household. 19 “And it shall come about that anyone who goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood *shall be* on his own head, and we *shall be* free; but anyone who is with you in the house, his blood *shall be* on our head, if a hand is *laid* on him. 20 “But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be free from the oath which you have made us swear.”

21 And she said, “According to your words, so be it.” So she sent them away, and they departed; and she tied the scarlet cord in the window.

The turning point in the episodic structure of Joshua 2 is contained in the extended dialogue of phase 3 between Rahab and the spies. The turning point or climax becomes the decisive step in the overall plot development of the story because it usually occurs when the conflict is most intense and it determines the final outcome of the story.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of verse 7 the King’s men are *outside* the city, relentless in their hunt for the Israelite spies, while the spies are trapped *inside* the city at the mercy of a Canaanite woman of questionable character. The danger, intrigue and vulnerability of the spies depicted in phase two heightens the audience’s interest in the ensuing conversation.

The three scenes in phase 3 form a chiasm in which verse 8 and verse 21 set boundaries for this entire segment. The first half of the text (2:8-14) parallels and mirrors the second half of the text (2:16-21). By noting the chiastic construct in these fourteen verses, attention is drawn to the primary concern of the writer which is found in verse 15 (see Figure 3). The statement “then she let them down” emphasizes the central point of the dialogue between the two Spies and Rahab.

<sup>14</sup> Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 205.

8	Rahab goes to the Spies
9a,11b	Rahab's profession of faith
9b-11a	Judgment for Canaanites
12-13	Rahab asks for an oath
14	Spies express loyalty to Rahab
15	<i>Rahab helps the Spies escape</i>
16	Rahab expresses loyalty to the Spies
17	Spies make an oath
18b-19	Salvation for Rahab's family
18a,20-20a	Rahab's obedience
21	Rahab sends the Spies away

*FIGURE 3: Chiasm in 2:8-21*

Verse 15 commences with the an imperfect verb with a waw consecutive, וַתִּזְרְקֵם (‘‘and she let them down’’). This sentence has been inserted into the middle of the dramatic dialogue between the Spies and Rahab. It does not fit a linear sequential chronology of events in this phase of the narrative. This verse becomes a summary annotation<sup>15</sup> by the author: Rahab’s faith produced good works (James 2:25).

The NIV attempts to convey this dischronologized statement by its translation of וַתִּזְרְקֵם לָהֶם in verse 16 with the pluperfect (‘‘now she had said to them’’). Thus, the conversation took place before they exited the window.

What transpires prior to this juncture in the story is truly extraordinary. Rahab discloses to these men her new found faith in Yahweh. (This disclosure represents one of the longest uninterrupted statements by a woman in the biblical narrative.) The men see that God’s grace has been extended to a Canaanite woman, even to a prostitute, one who is under the God-ordained ban from Deuteronomy 7.

<sup>15</sup> Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*, 156.

Bruce Waltke comments on her confession of faith (“the first in the Bible”) when he says, “Rahab’s night talk with the Spies disclosed her faith (9a,11b), in contrast to the Canaanites’ fear (9b-11a). Israel’s triumphs, in contrast to the Canaanites’ panic, convinced her that the Lord had given Israel the land (9) and that he is God (11; cf. T 4.39).”<sup>16</sup> The use of the word **רַחֻם** in verses 12 and 14, rendered as “kindly” or “kindness” in the major translations, confirms that this has taken place.

The concept of **רַחֻם** is an overwhelming expression of loyalty, faithfulness, and kindness that originates in God, the “initiator” and “keeper” of the covenant. **רַחֻם** is used 246 times in the Old Testament,<sup>17</sup> and it most frequently describes the disposition and beneficent actions of God toward His people. He graciously extends *hesed* (covenantal loyalty) to us, and we in-turn are favored to extend that same loyalty and kindness to others.

Rahab’s use of **רַחֻם** in verse 12 is a request that the spies, as representatives of the God of Israel extend to her and her family covenantal loyalty and kindness. Just as she bestowed covenantal loyalty to them by hiding and lying for them, she is requesting covenantal loyalty from them.

After the spies hear her confession, they immediately accept this converted prostitute into the full fellowship of the covenant community (2:16-21), and it is here that the author relieves the tension of the story which had prevailed since verse 7. It is here that the author inserts Rahab’s good work! As long as the spies remain in Jericho, they remain vulnerable to being detected. Her faith leads her to good works, helping the spies escape from their perilous location inside her house, in order that they might complete their mission.

### **PHASE THREE: ORIGINAL IMPLICATION**

As the original audience finished hearing the dialogue between Rahab and the spies, they would be reminded that faith is the instrument by which a person is saved. They would find Rahab’s “testimony” remarkable for a person who was the very antithesis of what Israel should be morally and religiously. Rahab had heard of the mighty acts of God and had placed her faith in that God.

Her confession of faith begins with the words “I know that,” a formulaic expression used more than once when a foreigner acknowledges Israelite truth (e.g. Exod.

<sup>16</sup> *New Century Bible Commentary*, “Joshua”, 239.

<sup>17</sup> *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol.2, Van Gemeren, 211-218.

18:11; 1 Kgs. 17:24; 2 Kgs. 5:15; Is. 45:3), and one which might have been known by the audience.<sup>18</sup> In verses 9-12, Rahab recites what amounts to an Israelite “Apostles Creed.” A few scholars have even acknowledged the possibility of a covenant-form in the conversation between Rahab and the Spies.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, by hearing that God had grafted Rahab into the covenant community because of her faith, they would be reminded that it was Abraham’s faith in God’s promise that was credited to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). Membership in the covenant was a result of faith and not of birthright or of keeping the Law.

Israel, at the time of reading this story, consisted of a mixed multitude, not only in ethnicity but also within the covenant community itself. Israel had turned to the idolatry and syncretism that exemplified the nations within Canaan. She was playing the harlot. However, the story of Rahab reminded Israel anew that it was faith that brought people into God’s family. She was a paradigm of hope for Israel. If their God would show grace to a Canaanite harlot then His grace was readily available to those who had been unfaithful and disobedient in keeping the covenant.

### **PHASE THREE: MODERN APPLICATION**

The modern audience has also been informed that entrance into God’s kingdom is not restricted. The Lord revealed this to the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-42) and again to Peter in Acts 10 when he was preaching to Cornelius’s household that salvation was possible for a Gentile family, just as salvation was possible for Rahab’s family. God is impartial when it comes to bestowing His saving grace (Acts 10:1). Paul, also clearly understands God’s intentions for he declares in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation *to everyone who believes*, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

Membership in God’s family is open to everyone through faith. This should be an exhilarating promise to those who are praying for friends and relatives. But it should also be a warning to those in the Church who are living a shallow and faithless life. Church attendance, tithing, baptism, etc. will not save anybody; neither will a parent’s faith bring salvation to a son or daughter. Each person must acknowledge Christ as Lord of his life and Him alone, as his means of salvation.

The New Testament reminds us that good works accompanied Rahab’s faith (Heb. 11:31; Jam. 2:25). Faith that unites us with Christ is not dead (Jam 2:18-26). Instead, it is

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<sup>18</sup> *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology & Exegesis, Vol.4*, Van Gemeren, 1125.

<sup>19</sup> K.M. Campbell, “Rahab’s Covenant,” *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. 22 (1972), 243-44.

alive and active, “working through love” (Gal. 5:8) and seeking to do all the “good works, which God prepared beforehand” for us (Eph. 2:10). Just as good works accompanied Rahab’s faith, so believers today should express their love for Christ through doing what pleases Him.

**PHASE FOUR (FALLING ACTION):** The Spies return safely (2:22-23a)

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22 And they departed and came to the hill country, and remained there for three days until the pursuers returned. Now the pursuers had sought *them* all along the road, but had not found *them*. 23 Then the two men returned and came down from the hill country and crossed over . . .

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The conflict which crested in phase 2 rapidly unravels and dissipates within phase 3. The sequence of three waw consecutives each attached to imperfect verbs in the first four words of verse 22 (וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ הָהָרָה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ) reflects the hasty movement of the spies into the hill country. At the same time that the spies were hiding, the king’s men were futilely searching for them. This is expressed by the use of the imperfect verb tense וַיִּבְקְשׁוּ (“and they searched”), specifying preceding action.

Once the three days had expired, the spies left for the Jordan River, but not “until” the king’s men had left the area. This is distinctively noted by the use of the adverb עַד (“until”) in a dependent verbal clause (עַד־שָׁבוּ הָרְדִפִּים). The report of the pursuit by the king’s men along the Jordan road is inserted to maintain the protection that Rahab still gives the spies. Just as she protected them from the king’s soldiers in phase 2, she continues to protect them from these same men by the wisdom of her advice in this phase (i.e. “get to the mountains . . . hide there three days”).

Verse 23 continues the rapid movement of the spies by means of a sequence of five waw consecutives and imperfect verbs.

*Excursus:* In verses 18-20, the spies had promised protection to Rahab and her family on condition of obedience. The threefold stipulations are 1) a scarlet cord must be tied to the window from which the spies escaped; 2) Rahab must gather everyone she wants to protect into her home; and 3) she must not report any information which might compromise the safety of the spies. Once Rahab agrees to these stipulations, the narrator immediately lets the audience know that the first condition was met in verse 21b, and another condition was met in verse 23 when the Spies reached Joshua, leaving the

audience anticipating the fulfillment of the last requirement to be met sometime in the future. The author continues artistically to weave the faith and character of Rahab into these final details of the story.<sup>20</sup>

#### **PHASE FOUR: ORIGINAL IMPLICATION**

As the story drew to a close, the original audience would have gained a sense of assurance of God's trustworthiness as they heard of the spies' safe yet cautious return to the west bank of the Jordan. The spies' mission from the very start had been fraught with danger. The narrative depicts the Canaanites resolute in their hostile and aggressive "pursuit" of the spies. They were hounded for days knowing that their capture would surely mean torture and ultimately death. Yet, despite their harrowing sortie into hostile territory, God brought them back to Joshua unharmed and their mission was accomplished.

When this story was received by God's people, the military victory of Canaan was unfinished and possibly even thought of as unattainable. The hunters (i.e. the Israelites) might even have become the hunted. God's people needed to be reminded anew of God's goodness, and also reminded that divine guidance was predetermined always to rescue God's people from the pursuit of their enemies. Just as these spies were hunted day and night by hostile Canaanites, yet saved by the goodness and loving-kindness of Yahweh, so this original audience would be rescued from all of their enemies by the goodness and loving-kindness of Yahweh as they persevered in their mission of conquering the Promised Land.

#### **PHASE FOUR: MODERN APPLICATION**

Today, God's covenant people have also been given a spying mission, and we too are being pursued and hunted, not by physical Canaanites but by the "spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12-13) and their master the devil. This enemy of the church schemes and works for our destruction and is likened to a cunning lion who hunts unsuspecting animals for sustenance (1 Pet. 5:8).

God is well aware of the forces opposing His church (1 John 3:8), and warns us of these spiritual forces poised to destroy us (Heb. 2:14). Yet, He doesn't leave His covenant people defenseless. He grants us weapons to use in fighting these spiritual

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<sup>20</sup> Richard E. Hess, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Joshua* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 94-95.

forces (Eph. 6:13-20; Jam. 4:7). We employ these weapons knowing that these spiritual forces of wickedness are too strong for us in our own power to defeat (John 16:7-15). Yes, we too are the hunted and the pursued in our responsibility of proclaiming the gospel. Yet as God's chosen ones, we are guaranteed rescue and deliverance (Ps. 18:48-50) through God's goodness and loving-kindness which "will follow (i.e. pursue) me all of my life." (Ps. 23:6)

**PHASE FIVE (RESOLUTION):** Joshua receives the report (2.23b-24)

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23b . . . And came to Joshua the son of Nun, and they related to him all that had happened to them. 24 And they said to Joshua, "Surely the LORD has given all the land into our hands, and all the inhabitants of the land, moreover, have melted away before us."

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The conclusion of the story is contained in phase five, and brings final closure to the story. The spies, after evading the king's men, faithfully report to Joshua concerning their mission. The repetition of "Joshua son of Nun" in 23b is used by the narrator to form an inclusion with verse 1, and closes the movement of the narrative. Here, as in verse 1, Joshua is depicted as the Israelite's divinely appointed authority.

The narrator reinforces the main theme of the story in the spies' words to Joshua. Their assertion is strikingly similar to the first and third statements of Rahab's initial faith proclamation found in verse 9 (See Figure 4). The principal dissimilarity is the elimination of the independent verbal clause וְכִי־נִפְלָה אִימַתְכֶם עָלֵינוּ which is located toward the middle of verse 9.

Rahab, the pagan prostitute who was under the ban, believed that the God of Israel had secured the Promised Land for Yahweh's people. The spies believed this too, and their repetition of Rahab's words only underscored this point. The promise of God was indeed certain (Deut. 2:25; 11:25), for God had already defeated the people of Jericho and all of Canaan.

יָדַעְתִּי (9a, 9c) כִּי־נָתַן יְהוָה לָכֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ . . . . . וְכִי נִמְגְּוּ כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם

(because-of-you the-country ones-living-of all-of they-melt-in-fear and-that . . . the-land to-you Yahweh he-gave that I-know)

I know that the Lord has given you this land, . . . and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted before you.

וְגַם־נִמְגְּוּ כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵינוּ: (24) כִּי־נָתַן יְהוָה בְּיָדֵנוּ אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ

(because-of-us the-land ones-living-of all-of they-melt-in-fear and-also the-land whole-of into-hand-of-us Yahweh he-gave surely)

The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us

*FIGURE 4: Comparison of Hebrew Grammar in 2.9a, 9c with 2.24*

#### **PHASE FIVE: ORIGINAL IMPLICATION**

These words of Rahab excerpted by the Spies for their report to Joshua would have evoked powerful memories from their past history for the original congregation. First, the spies' words were the fulfillment of the prophecy found in Moses's words after God's miraculous salvation of the Israelites from Pharaoh at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:15: "All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away"). And secondly, the faithful report of the two Spies diverges strikingly with the faithless majority report of the twelve men who explored Canaan under Moses (Num. 12:26-33).

These concluding words by the Spies would motivate, encourage and exhort this particular Israelite audience to go forward boldly and finish the conquest of the Promised Land. The days since the inaugural victories of Joshua might possibly have left the people shrouded in doubt and dispirited because Canaan was not completely subdued. These concluding words would passionately reinforce that what God had promised earlier in their history had come to fruition, and that victory was theirs if they continued in holy war. As Calvin states: "And although the mere promise of possessing the land ought to

have been sufficient, yet the Lord is so very indulgent to their weakness, that, for the sake of removing all doubt, he confirms what he had promised by experience.”<sup>21</sup>

#### **PHASE FIVE: MODERN APPLICATION**

Who of God’s people today does not need encouragement and exhortation to continue with holy war initiatives? We have been called to proclaim to the nations that the kingdom of God has come (Mk. 13:10) in the person of His Son Jesus Christ. What a wonderful message to proclaim! Yet, this message is not readily acknowledged by all, and becomes an ongoing battle (Matt. 5:10-11) for the hearts and souls of the lost between the church and the spiritual forces of this world.

Our gracious heavenly Father knows that holy war is a fatiguing duty for His church, and that our souls can become doubtful and discouraged. Since He knows our frailties so well that He furnishes us with encouragement and exhortation through His written word.

The church secures encouragement through the Holy Scriptures which recount God’s redeeming work for us (Rom. 15:4), and the church receives encouragement from its members (1 Thess. 5:11-14). God knows that His people need to be refreshed and strengthened in the war He has called them to fight.

But God also exhorts His church because she can become lazy and loveless (Rev. 2:4), and falter in her duty to wage holy war (Matt. 5:13-16). When this happens, God’s people need to be reminded of the great sacrifice made for them through the person and work of Christ (Heb. 9:12-14), and that salvation is not a one-time act but a lifetime of faith and obedience (Phil. 2:2).

#### **CONCLUSION**

Joshua 2 does what all well-written suspense dramas are supposed to do. It allows the reader to experience the thoughts, actions and feelings of the individuals in the story, and it pulls the listener directly into the events and action of the narrative. The account of Rahab and the spies is more than an entertaining, “happy-ending” story about a promiscuous woman who rescues two virtuous Israelites from the hands of their enemy. Moreover, it is not just a minor episode which precedes the main event, the fall of Jericho, four chapters later. Because it is God’s Word, this story has significant meaning for the church today!

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<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume IV*, 55.

Yes, Joshua 2 was written to a people in a peculiar place and a peculiar time who are far, far removed from our culture and history. And yes, there are obstacles that confront us as we endeavor to look for the author's original message. But by diligence and careful efforts to understand the original situation of the story, we are able to interpret and apply this chapter's message to God's people today.

This modern application of an Old Testament passage, and for that matter of any Old Testament passage, must always take into account the coming of the Jesus Christ and His resurrection. The presence of God's Son in history is the key to unlocking the wealth contained in this and any Old Testament story.

As it was then, the message of Joshua 2 for today is a message of grace and salvation. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, and His grace is extended to *all* who trust in Him for their salvation. Rahab is characterized as a sinner, for she was a Canaanite and a prostitute. But through faith she was adopted into God's family. The Church must recognize that it is not entitlement, merit or condition that determines who will be saved. The sovereign initiative in salvation is with God alone. For just as Christ was a friend to sinners and tax collectors, so the church should be unfettered in its message of gospel grace to *all* people regardless of their position in life.

But the story doesn't end there, for Rahab's newfound faith was not an irrelevant matter to her. It meant a change of allegiance. She renounced her old loyalties, wed herself to the covenant community, and immediately demonstrated her newfound faith by aiding God's people in their divinely appointed conquest. The church would do well to remember the place of honor bestowed on her by the writers of the New Testament, and to imitate her faith.

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