

Rahab, the Harlot

The Scriptures reveal a totally glorious God. He is absolutely sovereign over the affairs of men. He is sovereign over all history. He rules even the future. Sometimes God works overtly, such as the Exodus from Egypt. But His acts are often hidden, such as in the Book of Esther. Or God's workings may be there in the text but evident only to those who love the Scriptures and look for connections within texts. And something else: God is faithful to His covenants and promises, even if His people aren't. A wonderful story is hidden in the Hebrew Scriptures that links these truths about God. Let's uncover it.

In Genesis 38, Judah has a sexual liaison with Tamar, a Gentile. It's all rather sordid, so I'll keep the details of the episode to as few as necessary. So Tamar gets pregnant, and she gives birth to twins. The first baby to emerge from Tamar gets a red cord tied to him because that one, the firstborn, receives primogeniture. That firstborn was named Zerah, and the twin, the second born, was named Perez. And, since Judah's line is later (Chapter 49) proclaimed to produce the Messiah/King who will fulfill the Abrahamic blessings and promises, that unique, promised One would have to come from Zerah, Judah's firstborn. Nothing further about that episode appears in Torah.

Half a millennium later, the Israelites were about to cross the Jordan to enter and conquer the Land that God had promised to them. We read in the Book of Joshua that, for no good reason, from Shittim Joshua sent spies into the Land. That was totally unnecessary. God had already clearly promised they would have victory. So this was a failure of faith in God. Worse, it was from Shittim that the decision to send them was made, a place where the Israelites played the harlot with Gentile women (Numbers 25). Having entered the Land, the spies went to the house of a harlot. Why there? Well . . . Why else go to the house of a harlot? More failure!

But it turns out that (surprise!) Rahab the harlot plays harlotry *with her own people*. She turns her back on the Canaanite gods and embraces with astounding faith the God of the Israelites. She even uses Torah language, "For the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below." How ironic, this Gentile woman (a prostitute!), has greater faith in God than the Israelites. And she puts her faith into action (see James 2) by hiding the Israelite spies and appealing to them for rescue. So they make an arrangement whereby Rahab ties a red cord around her house's window, so that when Israel comes to destroy Jericho, she'll be saved. "Red cord." Think Genesis 38! There's no other "red cord" anywhere in the Bible.

Immediately after Jericho was destroyed and Rahab was saved from the law of *herem*, disaster struck. So, now the Book of Joshua tells the dreadful episode of Achan's sin. Again, I'll just recount the necessary details. Achan violated the law of *herem*. And it turns out that Achan is a Judahite, and even worse, a Zerahite! More failure. Achan and his entire house had to be destroyed, placed under *herem*. So, end of the line of Zerah! The author of Joshua deliberately contrasts the story of Rahab with the story of Achan. Why? Because this woman, although a Gentile, is a "true Israelite," that is, an Israelite by faith in Israel's God.

So Rahab was taken in marriage by Salmon, who was of the line of Perez. We're back to Perez, now! And Rahab gave birth to Boaz; and Boaz married Ruth, another Gentile woman; and Ruth gave birth to Obed who fathered Jesse, the father of David. So Rahab, a Canaanite harlot, is placed in the line to bring forth Jesus, the Messiah/King of Israel. That's why Tamar and Rahab

(and Ruth) are in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew Chapter 1. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Mary are necessary in the line to Jesus because God said at the Fall that the ultimate defeat of the Serpent would come thru the seed of a woman (Genesis 3:15). The “seed of a woman” is more than just Mary. Let’s think now about all the lessons that are here.

A red cord identified the house of Zerah for judgment. A red cord identified the house of Rahab for salvation. A certain cross identifies people for judgment just as it identifies others for salvation. God is sovereign in electing those of His choice. Read Romans Chapter 9 again. Election is the theological context to this discussion here. God has His purposes in election (Romans 9:11b). The Perez/Zerah story mirrors the Jacob/Esau story. But if God’s election is inscrutable—and it is!—let’s observe that Judah was chosen from among the twelve because he offered himself as a sacrifice to save the life of Benjamin and their father Jacob. Judah made a decision that glorified God, and God rewarded him super-abundantly. Our choices in life matter! Let’s make wise choices based on God’s Word, not according to our desires or the values of the world we live in.

God controls history according to His purposes and wisdom, not according to human culture or tradition. Esau was the firstborn, but he was not to be in the line to produce the promised Messiah. Zerah was the firstborn, but he was not to be in the line to produce the promised Messiah. God is in total control of all human events. Trust in God can be a slogan in our evangelical churches. We need to be radical in our trust in God.

And notice also how God fulfills His purposes *in spite of* failures. He loves His people and is ever faithful to them even if they fail to respond as they should. Even though Jews rejected Jesus as Messiah/King when He first came, God hasn’t abandoned His chosen ones. A glorious future awaits them when Jesus returns. See Zechariah 12 and 14, for example.

And one more lesson: All Scripture is coherent. It’s a unity. That’s because the Bible is a supernatural book, authored by the One who created language. It reveals God’s acts as well as propositional truths because all that God does is theologically significant. It’s in the text of Scripture that we encounter the living God. Let’s not read it hastily, nor for mere information. We should read it as we’d read a love letter.

Time may separate historical events, but God transcends time and so He fulfills His will and purposes according to His own timing. We need to see the whole scope of Scripture to grasp God’s full revelation of Himself. And so we can be certain that end-time events are going to occur exactly as intended, so that all Scripture is fulfilled.

We need to live in conformity with such ineffable truths about God as these. God is the most beautiful, the most wonderful Being. And He’s called us into an intimate, personal relationship with Himself. So let’s abandon everything that hinders our only appropriate response, which is to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him with all our being. He is worthy. And besides, it’s why we’re here.