

Rahab a life on the “boundary”

This minor figure in the great biblical panorama is the source for the author’s interesting personal reflection. The constant reference to the Hebrew world, where the word ‘history’ is feminine plural. The generous woman. The significance of her name, which seems to reflect her story. To be a woman at the “boundary” means allowing the “inside and the outside” to meet, in order to widen the love-space of one’s own heart.

For years I found that the figure of **Rahab**, as described in the book of **Joshua 2:1-21** was always sketchy, silent and embryonic. What follows is not an exegetical analysis, or a theological commentary, but simply the fruit of many encounters with this passage and conversations with friends; with no other expertise than the privilege of direct contact with the Hebrew text. It is an attempt to share my personal encounter with a woman, Rahab, who lives guided by her instinct, by intuition, by feelings; perhaps by curiosity and persistent uncertainty. It’s all here.

In Hebrew, the word “history” is in the feminine plural. *Toledot* means “generations”, that continuous cycle of being born and dying. Between one verb and the other, there is life. History comes from a woman’s womb; it begins with a spasm of labour pains and a head emerging into the world. “Eve” in Hebrew, suggests and means, “present”. The

woman is the one who brings the present to birth, gives it a soul and a body. The man, from the first, gives names to things, and while Adam is giving names, Eve is doing her best to live, creating present time. For her, life is not an abstract name-giving but concerns procreation, that which lies between birth and death. Eve is distracted by words. Her concern is to nourish, not to attribute. That is her life since the world’s beginning, since that unique moment when she tastes and offers the fruit which is not knowledge but rather the thirst for it. The woman and the serpent give themselves knowledge: a special form of knowledge. Because

of it, Eve’s curse is a combination of physical and spiritual pain, in her body and in her heart. Hebrew tradition says that from that moment on, the woman had to submit to ten unavoidable violations in her life (cf. Gen 3:16). Among them would be: the two sheddings of blood, which are menstruation and the rupture of virginity, the “pain” and anxiety of bringing up children, “labour pains” and suffering during pregnancy. Of all the curses, the one which struck Eve is certainly the most terrible. For the man, the Lord pronounced toil and sweat, but not labour pains. Only the woman is touched by a pain which combines body and spirit, the sharp pain of childbirth and indefinable sorrow.

Through the ravaging of the woman, as described in the bible, she receives a perception of herself and of the world in which the inner and the outer meet, and the outer skin competes with the fibres that lie beneath. It is as if God



had said to her, "You will suffer, here or there. You will not bother to distinguish one pain from another". It is as if he had said, "Stay at the limit, be a woman of the boundary. Yes, be the door of welcome just as you are". Simply that.

Rahab is a generous woman. Even her name – as an adjective, it means "spacious", or "ample", tells us this. It means "long-suffering". Also "courageous"; courageous with the recklessness of those who do not know if they are acting out of fear, or conviction or principle. They do it because it is their instinct.

It is not fear, in fact, which draws Rahab towards the enemy she certainly knows will win the battle. Rahab has a powerful name, which signifies outreach: she sees farther than others and acts accordingly. She is far-seeing. Her eyes and her heart stretch out, just a little beyond others. There is a somewhat wider view from the roof of her house: on one side, the city, with secrets hidden in its terraces; on the other, the desert and the Dead Sea and the Sea of Reeds which the children of Israel have crossed on dry land, thanks to the Lord of Hosts. Rahab knows all this; she saw and heard it, because she lives on the extreme edge of the city. Hers is a house built into the wall, a little beyond and outside the inhabited centre. On the boundary – and from the boundary, reality is more clear-cut, more open. Rahab sees reality like that: from outside and from inside, simultaneously. As if on the edge of a frontier that is not metaphorical or imaginary but tangible: a



frontier as it were marked out by the rope by which the spies lower themselves from the window of her house on to the slope which looks out over the desert, and by the scarlet cord hanging from the same window which enables her to be recognised and saved together with her family, the only one in the city.

Rahab is one of history's tightrope-walkers. She is an acrobat on a line; a frontier between the inside and the outside; a rope courageously let down from a window; a scarlet cord to distinguish her from others. She is all these; and she is endowed with grace, reasonableness, and profound humanity.

Her skill goes beyond just staying on the rope. Because she finds herself balancing on this fine edge for a long time, Rahab sees things denied to others, she hears things which those who live inside themselves, blissfully apart in their own world, are not able to imagine. Her house on the wall opens onto a wide landscape, and Rahab has witnessed there the mighty deeds of the Eternal. She has heard Israel's rejoicing when the sea opened to let the tribes pass through in their flight from Egypt. Within the city, there is no-one more astute.

Why does Rahab live there, on the boundary wall? Is it because

her story is about the threshold between the inside and the outside? She belongs to Jericho, but not entirely; Jericho belongs to her, but not completely. In a way, she is a stranger in her own house, and she herself decides what she will do, and how. She chooses faithfulness to the enemy, though not, strictly speaking, betraying her city: she limits herself to saving the lives of two unknown men, who in exchange will save her life when the time comes. Everything is bound up with a rope: firstly, the rope which lowered the men down, then the one which was a sign for herself and her family. If Rahab had not lived almost inside the boundary wall, nothing of this could have happened. The spies would not have found safety by letting themselves down from the window, and no-one from the outside would have been able to recognise her as they advanced at great speed to raze the city to the ground. The boundary wall was her salvation.

But why does Rahab live in the boundary wall?

It is said of her that she was a *zonah*. This is a complex and provoking word. In Hebrew, it traditionally means, "prostitute". Nevertheless, this is not a casual or contemptuously given generic name. Some translations make Rahab the keeper of a boarding-house. Perhaps "wet-nurse" might be better. The word *zonah* certainly comes from the same semantic root as food – provisions, nourishment, refuelling. Undoubtedly, it has assumed a strong negative connotation: it suggests everything which, in terms of love, is illicit.



Despicable. Idolotrous. The zonah is one who leads astray, one who colludes with abominations. It really is a very powerful word. Yet behind this word there is the unequivocal idea of a woman who nourishes. This much is true, that beguiled by the happy ending, not a few translators have made Rahab a future part of the people of Israel, a heroine of dread and courage: even a keeper of a boarding-house. But we are talking of a prostitute. A radiant future of many descendents awaits Rahab through the genealogical tree of sacred history. And yet she is not a woman who is redeemed. Rahab is not one who understands that she has done and thought evil up to one particular moment, and who changes her ways at the very instant when the story condescends to include her. She is simply an intelligent and sensible woman who lives at the outer wall of the city. Once saved, she does not change her ways or get excited. For her there is no reformation, only a constant, heightened awareness of the world in which she finds herself. With a last look at the distant desert, Rahab disappears from the story entirely, at the exact point when for her it comes to a successful conclusion. Jericho is now in the

hands of Israel, and the people continue their march towards the Promised Land.

There still remains the mystery of the connection between the one who nourishes and the one who offers herself. They are different (but related) forms of womanly generosity. Rahab is perhaps driven by elemental fear when she welcomes Israel's spies, hides them and helps them to escape. For her there is no shadow of doubt that they will conquer, and that to survive she will need to rally behind them. But apart from this feeling, there is the personal understanding of a woman who lives at the edge, in the boundary wall of the city, at mid-point between the outside and the inside. Neither inside nor outside. This is a most difficult, yet in many ways privileged, place to be, which has enabled her to see further in time and space than her fellow-citizens.

Hers is a story of feelings rather than of ingenuity. Perhaps living on the boundaries has enlarged her heart, made her more capable of compassion. Rahab put out her hand, instead of withdrawing it. This is shown by the rope hung from her window, the scarlet cord which later replaced it, her vocation as a *zonah*, that is, a woman who welcomes, ei-

ther with a mouthful of food or with her own body.

In the Torah there are other women like her, balancing themselves at the boundaries. But all do not show the same greatness of soul; the two mothers who confront each other in the presence of King Solomon, for example (1K 3:16-28). They also were two "women of welcome" but from what they recount of their lives, one can deduce a certain precariousness, an existence at the boundaries of normality. For them, everything was concentrated in that night's scene: childbirth, sleep, milk, awakening, death.

But to be women of the boundaries means, basically, to allow the "inner" and the "outer" to meet: and for this a great heart is needed, full of love to spread around. A great heart of wisdom and of weakness, admirable but vulnerable, flexible as a reed that bows at the first breeze. A love which attaches itself wherever it finds itself, like those seeds made of hooks and clinging hairs which one cannot remove without doing harm to oneself. A love which throws our arms open wide each day.

And draws hearts closer together than ever.

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