

RAHAB'S LIE AND SITUATION ETHICS

Bert Thompson, Ph.D. and Sam Estabrook

One of the best-known stories in the Old Testament concerns the unusual manner in which the Israelites conquered the city of Jericho while they were in the process of inhabiting the land of Canaan. A woman named Rahab not only provided sanctuary in her house for two Israelite spies but, when asked by the king's men about the matter, lied in order to protect them. Later, the lives of Rahab and her household were spared when Jericho was destroyed—a fact that has provided grist for the mill of Bible critics who suggest that this account establishes God's approval of "situation ethics." Their argument is as follows. Rahab lied. But the situation required that she do so for good reason—to protect the spies. Rahab was blessed, and her household was spared certain death. Thus, God obviously approves of situation ethics (e.g., lying under certain conditions). How should the Bible believer respond to such a suggestion? **Does God approve of situation ethics?**

In the sixth chapter of the Old Testament book of Joshua we find the familiar story of the Israelites' siege of the famous city of Jericho. The people of the city had heard of the many successes of God's people as they defeated various enemies throughout the land of Canaan. And they were determined that Jericho would not fall to the Israelites as so many other cities around them had. Joshua 6:1 confirms that fact by observing that "Jericho was securely shut up because of the children of Israel; none went out, and none came in." Therefore, the Lord gave Joshua several specific commands relating to how the Israelites were to overcome the city. God said to Israel's leader:

You shall march around the city, all you men of war; you shall go all around the city once. This you shall do six days. And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark. But the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets. Then it shall come to pass, when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the trumpet, that all the people shall shout with a great shout; then the wall of the city will fall down flat (Joshua 6:3-5).

Prior to the Israelites' attack on the city, however, Joshua sent two men to Jericho as spies to examine the city secretly (Joshua 2:1). Upon their arrival, they came to the house of a woman by the name of Rahab (who was a harlot) and lodged there. Apparently, the fact that two strangers had entered the closed city raised suspicions among some of the townspeople, who then told the king of the strangers' arrival. He, in turn, sent his representatives to investigate. Arriving at Rahab's house, they said to her: "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to search out all the country" (2:3). The text goes on to indicate that Rahab had hidden the spies under stalks of flax on the roof of her house. She then told the king's messengers: "Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And it happened as the gate was being shut, when it was dark, that the men went out. Where the men went I do not know; pursue them quickly, for you may overtake them" (2:5).

While the king's men gave chase along the road to the Jordan River, Rahab pleaded with the spies:

I know that the Lord has given you the land.... For the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.... Now therefore, I beg you, swear to me by the Lord, since I have shown you kindness, that you also will show kindness to my father's house, and give me true token, and spare my father, my mother, my brothers, my sisters, and all that they have, and deliver our lives from death (2:9,11-13).

The spies answered her, "Our lives for yours, if none of you tells this business of ours. And it shall be, when the Lord has given us the land, that we will deal kindly and truly with you" (2:14). The two men then instructed Rahab to place a scarlet cord in the window of her house (which adjoined the wall of the city). This would be a sign to the Israelite army that she and all of her family were to be spared because they had helped God's people.

Critics of the Bible have charged that this particular story involves God in a moral contradiction. Rahab lied to the king's messengers. Yet God blessed Rahab, as is evident from the fact that: (a) she and her family were the only ones spared when the Israelites invaded Jericho; and (b) she is commended in two separate New Testament passages (Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25). The critics have claimed, therefore, that Rahab was blessed by God as a direct result of her lie—a sin that the Bible elsewhere condemns (Exodus 20:16). How should a Bible believer respond to such a charge?

In addressing the critics' allegations, let us first admit the obvious. Rahab **did** lie—not once, but twice. When the king's emissaries came to interrogate her, she lied when she feigned ignorance about the spies being Israelites. She then lied a second time when she told the intermediaries that the spies had left the city through the main gate under cover of darkness. Let us also freely admit that Rahab and her household were the only ones saved during the assault upon Jericho (Joshua 6:17).

The question is not whether Rahab lied. She did. The question is not whether she was saved during Jericho's destruction. She was. The questions that must be addressed are these: (1) Did God bless Rahab **as a result of her lie**?; and (2) Is "situation ethics" acceptable? That is to say, can a person lie on certain occasions (if the situation warrants it) and still be pleasing to God?

First, what does the Bible have to say about lying? Of the Ten Commandments, the ninth forbade lying (Exodus 20:16). And, in both the Old and New Testaments, the telling of a falsehood is condemned (Leviticus 19:11; Proverbs 6:16-19; Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:9). As one writer stated the matter: "Just as there are no exceptions to the adultery commandment, there is none for the Ninth Commandment" (Webster, 1993, p. 2). God has denounced explicitly any form of lying and has made it clear that those who commit such a sin without repenting shall spend eternity "in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone which is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).

Second, a close examination of the actual events of Joshua 2 is in order. Note, for example, that the spies never asked Rahab to lie for them. In fact, there is no indication in the text that the spies even knew Rahab **had** lied. Since they were hiding on the roof (Joshua 2:8), it is extremely unlikely that they had any knowledge of her sin. It is wrong to suggest that Rahab received God's blessings **as a result of her lie**. The two New Testament passages that mention Rahab do not commend her for the sin of lying. Quite the opposite, in fact. The writer of Hebrews placed Rahab in the great "hall of fame of faith" (Hebrews 11) because "she received the spies with peace" (vs. 31). James acknowledged that she was "justified by works when she received the messengers" (2:25). Nowhere in Scripture is Rahab's sin of lying spoken of approvingly. Instead, it is her faith and her righteous works that are commended and approved. As one writer observed:

What she is commended for is her faith or that which prompted her to deliver the spies from her townspeople, **not** the means by which she accomplished it. She had heard about God's dealings with Egypt and how He had delivered Israel through the parting of the Red Sea. So, the word of hearing profited her, because it was united by faith (Heb. 4:2). James did not write, "... was not Rahab the harlot justified by lying, in that she spoke an untruth to the king's men and sent the spies out another way?" Her faith was evidenced in the work of receiving the spies and sending them out another way (Lloyd, 1990, p. 357, emp. added).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the context of Rahab's life and vocation. She was a prostitute, living in a pagan city. Wayne Jackson wrote:

The case of Rahab is an example of where God honored a person due to their obedient faith in spite of a personal character flaw. Consider the following facts about this incident. Rahab was from a pagan environment. Her concept of morality and her personal lifestyle (she was a harlot) needed considerable refining. In spite of this sordid background, she had developed a genuine faith in Jehovah

(Josh. 2: 9ff.). She referred to Him as “God in heaven above, and on earth beneath....” Accordingly, when the spies approached her, she was not “disobedient” as were the others of Jericho, who perished in the destruction of the city, for she, through faith in God and His promises, received the spies in peace (Heb. 11:31), hid them, and sent them out another way (Jas. 2:25)[1986, 22[6]:23].

Should we be surprised that a prostitute, living in pagan surroundings, would lie to governmental authorities? Hardly. But she was not saved because she lied—a critical point that needs expanding. In addressing this idea, Allen Webster observed: “Rahab lied, true, but God never complimented this action. She was a heathen, not yet even converted to Judaism.... She was saved in spite of her lying, and not because of it. She was a prostitute, but this text does not authorize such activity” (1993, p. 2, emp. in orig.). This is a part of the story that seems to have been missed by the Bible critics who have isolated Rahab’s lie not only from the context of the story itself, but also from the remainder of her life and additional biblical commentary on that life.

Having established the fact that Rahab’s lie was not the reason for her commendation within the pages of Scripture, the question arises: Why, then, was she honored within the great “hall of fame of faith” in Hebrews 11 and spoken of by James as having been “justified”? There can be no doubt that Rahab occupies a special place within the biblical text, since she is one of only five women listed as being within the lineage of Christ. [She married Salmon, an Israelite, and thereby became the mother of Boaz, Jesse’s grandfather, joining Tamar, Bathsheba, Ruth, and Mary in the Lord’s ancestry.]

Surely, the answer to the question has to do with the fact that Rahab did not remain in her sinful state. In fact, “her repentance is implied since the New Testament writers commend only those Old Testament characters whose lives as a whole reflect an obedient faith” (Grizzell, 1986, 15[9]:70, emp. in orig.). The operative phrase here, of course, is “lives as a whole.” Rahab was not mentioned favorably by the writers of the books of Hebrews and James because she told a lie at one point in her life. Rather, she was commended for a lifetime of righteousness that followed a previous life of sin.

Consider two other famous Old Testament characters who committed heinous sins yet who overcame those sins and were counted as faithful in God’s eyes. Noah, for example, was “righteous,” “perfect in his generations,” and a man who “walked with God” (Genesis 6:9). Yet after the Flood he became drunk in front of his sons and as a result, his nakedness was exposed before one of them (Genesis 9:20-23). Was Noah permanently condemned for a temporary sin? Gary Grizzell addressed this issue when he wrote:

There is absolutely no record of anyone reproving Noah for his sin. There is no record of his repentance. This is the extent of the Old Testament revelation of Noah’s retirement years. Did Noah die in an unrepentant state? No, just as Rahab did not die a harlot and a liar.... In the twenty-seven books of the New Testament there is not one hint of the historical fact of his sin of drunkenness. The only logical conclusion is that this implies his repentance prior to his death (1986, 15[9]:70).

We know this to be the case because, like Rahab, Noah is mentioned specifically in Hebrews 11:7, and even is referred to as having become “an heir of righteousness which is according to faith.”

Consider also the example of Israel’s beloved king, David, who had insisted on righteousness in his nation. The people had been taught to love, respect, and honor God. David, their sovereign, also was their example—a man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). But he committed adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1-12), and had her husband, Uriah, murdered. The consequences of David’s sin were horrific indeed. The child growing in Bathsheba’s womb died after birth. And Nathan, God’s prophet, made it clear to the great king that “the sword shall never depart from thy house,” and that God would “raise up evil against thee out of thine own house” (2 Samuel 12:10-11).

David’s life never again would be the same. His child was dead. His reputation was damaged. His influence, in large part, was destroyed. David paid for his sin with twenty years of strife, heartbreak, and the loss of a child that meant everything to him. Yet the king did not deny his error. In fact, he said quite simply, “I have sinned” (2 Samuel 12:13). His agonizing prayer is recorded in Psalm 51 where he cried: “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness.” Years later, the apostle John would write: “Hath not the scripture said that the Christ cometh of the seed of David?” (John 7:42). From the loins of a sinful king who was willing to repent was formed an important part of the Messiah’s lineage. As Grizzell noted: “God judges a man by the whole of his life, not one act of sin in his life” (1986, 15[9]:70). Neither Noah nor David should be condemned permanently because of a temporary occurrence of sin. As these two men stood accountable before God, each accepted personal responsibility for his actions. They became noteworthy characters in biblical history not because of their sinful mistakes, but because of their eventual repentance and lifetimes spent in God’s service.

Does the Bible condemn lying? Indeed it does. The concept that “the end justifies the means” never has been correct. As Steve Lloyd wrote: “Simply because something works out in the end does not imply that the means are justifiable before God” (1990, p. 356). As with any other sin, if a person lies and does not repent, that person will spend eternity in hell. If Bible critics would consider the Scriptures in their entirety, rather than isolating individual passages in an attempt to justify their preconceived conclusion that the Bible contains contradictions and discrepancies, controversy over such matters would cease to exist. Furthermore, it reeks of inconsistency for the critic to “pick and choose” matters that at first glance appear to support his allegations, yet ignore passages that refute those same allegations. As Eddie Miller put it:

...the person who argues for situation ethics by using the example of Rahab is making a serious mistake in terms of sound Biblical exegesis. He has taken one sketchy, obviously incomplete story about a prostitute who lied, to overturn many clear statements of scripture (Exo. 20:16, Col. 3:9, Eph. 4:25). Surely that is not dealing honestly with the Bible text. (Incidentally, how would they deal with God’s disapproval of the lies of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-6?) The truth is that proper interpretation takes place when we allow explicit statements of scripture to explain or modify the examples, *not vice versa* (1983, 19[12]:4, emp. and parenthetical comment in orig.).

There is nothing inherently wrong with questioning what the Bible contains—as long as a person is willing to invest the time and effort to find the answers and resolve any doubts. This is the same procedure that people use in every other area of human interest (science, philosophy, etc.) on a daily basis. Why, then, should it not be employed in matters concerning God’s Word?

Rahab—a prostitute from a pagan background—humbled herself before the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When she cried out, “I know that...the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (2:9), she confessed her willingness to acknowledge both His existence and His sovereignty. It was not enough, however, for her merely to express her faith verbally. Rather, she had to act upon it by: (a) keeping silent about the spies’ mission (Joshua 2:14,20); (b) binding the scarlet cord in the window of her house (2:18); and (c) remaining inside that house, which would be the sole location of her deliverance when God destroyed Jericho (2:18-19).

God expects—and deserves—the same kind of obedience from us today. Critic and Christian alike should be willing to say, as did this laudable lady from days of old, “According unto your words, so be it” (Joshua 2:21). What an admirable attitude—and how worthy of being imitated! Rahab sinned, repented, and obeyed. If we today should sin, surely those of us who know more about God, His Word, and His will for our lives than she did ought to follow her example in repentance, obedience, and service.

REFERENCES

- Grizzell, Gary L. (1986), “Rahab the Harlot and Situation Ethics,” *The Defender*, 15[9]:66-67,70,72, September.
- Jackson, Wayne (1986), “From Our Mail,” *Christian Courier*, 22[6]:23, October.
- Lloyd, Steven M. (1990), “Answering False Doctrines Relating to James,” *Studies in James*, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Publications).
- Miller, Eddie J. (1983), “Did God Approve Rahab’s Lie,” *Words of Truth*, 19[12]:4, March 25.
- Webster, Allen (1993), “Did God Approve of Rahab’s Lie?,” *Words of Truth*, 29[25]:2,4, June 18.

Originally Published In
Reason & Revelation
November 1999, 19[11]:81-84

ARTICLE REPRINT

Distributed by
Apologetics Press, Inc.
230 Landmark Drive
Montgomery, AL 36117-2752
(334) 272-8558