

Haftarah

'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.'



The men said to her, "Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the LORD gives us the land."

Then she let them down by a rope through the window...

Joshua 2:14-15

Connection

- In the Jewish calendar the Torah portion *Shelah Lekha* (Numbers 13:1-15:41) and the Haftarah (Joshua 2:1-24) both tell of a delegation of Israelites sent on a reconnaissance mission in the promised land. Both include a tale of deception which in the Torah portion brings disaster to the Israelites, but in the Haftarah it spells salvation and victory.

Background

- The book of Joshua picks up the story of the Israelites after the death of Moses. Under the leadership of Joshua and aided by divine intervention the Israelites cross the Jordan river (chapter 3) and take possession of the land of Canaan. In the book of Joshua this military conquest is interpreted as the action of God who succeeds in the divine plan of re-establishing the ancient Hebrew people in their homeland.

Points to note

- *'A prostitute whose name was Rahab'* (2:1). The literal meaning of the Hebrew *zonah* is 'prostitute', however Rashi and some other Jewish commentators have softened its interpretation to read 'innkeeper', i.e., one who 'provides food' (Hebrew: *zun*).
- Rahab's house is in the city wall (see 2:15). Some commentators suggest here an allusion to her social status: she is a resident of the city but on the 'edge' of society.
- *'The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below'* (2:11). Rahab is esteemed in Jewish tradition for her monotheism; her recognition of the God of Israel. In the storytelling of the midrash she becomes the wife of Joshua and the mother of prophets and priests.
- Rahab is also esteemed in Christian tradition for her active faith in God (see Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25) and is named in the ancestry of Jesus (Matthew 1:5).
- Compare verses 9 & 24: the spies repeat Rahab's exact words in their report. The depiction of the superior power of the Israelites over the Canaanites sharply contrasts the 'grasshopper' image used by the spies in Num.13:33.
- Discussion point: If you were developing this Haftarah as a piece of theatre, how would you structure it and title the key scenes? e.g., Act I: The mission; Act II: The negotiation; Act III: The escape.

Reflection

- *The character of 'prostitute as heroine' acting as God's agent brings an intriguing dimension to the story of salvation. Discuss.*

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Sarna, ed., *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarah* (Philadelphia, 2002). Scripture quotations: NRSV.