

JUSTIFICATION AND SANCTIFICATION

Rahab the Prostitute

Scripture never takes the label off her. Fifteen centuries later the apostles are still calling her the prostitute — and that is better news than a rewrite.

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A post went around this week that set two verses side by side. From Joshua 2, the phrase everyone remembers: *Rahab the prostitute*. From Matthew 1, the same woman standing in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. And then the conclusion the poster drew from the pairing — that God has the redemptive capability to “change labels and rewrite stories” for his purposes and our good.

It is a good instinct pointed at a real thing. The woman in the Jericho wall really is in the line of the Messiah. That is not sentiment; it is the text. And the reflex behind the post — that God does something with people the respectable would not touch — is worth defending.

But the second half of the sentence gives away more than it means to. Scripture does not change her label. It keeps it. It keeps it with a stubbornness that looks almost deliberate, and the reason it keeps it is the best news in the passage.

The verse that spares her still calls her the prostitute

We meet her in Joshua 2. Four chapters later the city falls, and Joshua sends the two spies back for her. The narrator reports that she and her father’s household were spared, and that she dwelt in Israel — not as a resident alien on the edge of the camp, but among the covenant people, and, the text says, to this day.

And in that same verse she is *Rahab the prostitute*.

Read it slowly, because the ordering matters. The narrator has just told you she is inside. He has told you the scarlet cord held, that the oath was kept, that the God of Israel made good on a promise sworn to a Canaanite prostitute by two spies with no authority to swear it. He has every literary reason on earth to give her a new title in the sentence that records her rescue. He does not. The rescue is reported and the label stands.

Fifteen centuries, and it still stands

Then comes the long silence. Judges, the monarchy, the divided kingdom, the exile, the return, four hundred years of nothing. Depending on how you date the conquest, somewhere between thirteen and fifteen hundred years pass between the fall of Jericho and the writing of the New Testament. Empires rise and fall in that gap. The Hebrew Scriptures are completed in it.

And on the far side of all of it, the apostles are still saying it.

Hebrews 11 gathers the great cloud of witnesses — Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses — and when it arrives at Jericho it does not say “Rahab, who was transformed.” It says *Rahab the prostitute*, and then commends her faith. James, arguing the opposite corner of the same doctrine, reaches for her as his second example after Abraham, and he says it too: *Rahab the prostitute*, justified by works when she received the messengers.

Notice what that means. In the two places in the entire New Testament where this woman is held up as an example — one for faith, one for the works that faith produces — the inspired writers keep the title. The commendation and the label arrive in the same breath, in the same clause, fifteen hundred years after the fact.

That is not an oversight. Nobody forgets to edit a résumé for a millennium and a half.

Four women, four scandals

Matthew does the same thing, and he does it with a design you can see once it is pointed out.

An ancient Jewish genealogy is a list of fathers. Matthew breaks the pattern four times before he gets to Mary, and every break is a woman attached to a scandal.

Tamar, who entered the line of Judah by disguising herself as a prostitute and sitting at the roadside.

Rahab, who did not need the disguise.

Ruth, the Moabite — and Deuteronomy has a specific and unflattering thing to say about Moabites in the assembly of the LORD.

And then the fourth, where Matthew does something remarkable. He will not write Bathsheba’s name. He writes that David was the father of Solomon *by the wife of Uriah*. He could have named her and moved on. Instead he names the man David had killed, which means the murder is sitting in the genealogy of the Messiah, in the Christmas reading, in the first chapter of the New Testament, where nobody can get past it.

That is not an editor rewriting a story for our better. That is a rap sheet, entered into evidence on purpose.

Two different gospels

Here is why the distinction is not a quibble.

If God's redemptive work is to rewrite the story, then the promise reaches me on the far side of the rewrite. I am waiting to become someone else, and the evidence that God has done anything is that I can point to the difference. This is the native grammar of American evangelicalism: the testimony arc, the before-and-after, the *I'm not that person anymore*. It preaches beautifully to the person whose rewrite is well underway. It has nothing to say to the person whose label is still accurate — which is to say, it has nothing to say to any of us at three in the morning.

But if the label stays and she is in the line of the Messiah anyway, then the promise does not wait for anything. Rahab is not evidence of what God can make of a person. She is evidence of what God does for people whose descriptions are true.

The Reformation word for this is imputation. The Apology is blunt about it: the righteousness by which we are accounted righteous before God is not a quality poured into us and thereafter owned by us, but Christ's own righteousness credited to us and received by faith. It is His, it is outside of us, and it is reckoned to our account while we are still what we are. Which is why Luther's phrase is not a paradox for its own sake but a plain description of the Christian: *simul iustus et peccator*. At the same time righteous and a sinner. Not half of each. Not a sinner improving into a saint on a sliding scale. Wholly a sinner in myself and wholly righteous in Christ, simultaneously, today.

Rahab did not get promoted out of her category. She got a Savior who was born into it.

“And such were some of you”

The strongest objection to all of this is a single line in 1 Corinthians 6, and any treatment of the subject that dodges it is not worth reading.

Paul lists the unrighteous who will not inherit the kingdom — a long, specific, uncomfortable list — and then turns to the congregation and says that such *were* some of you. Past tense. Then: but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified.

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! The sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, passive homosexual partners, practicing homosexuals, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, the verbally abusive, and swindlers will not inherit the kingdom of God. Some of you once lived this way. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (NET)

Doesn't that settle it? Wasn't the label removed?

Look at the verbs. Every one of them is passive, and every one of them is located outside the Corinthians. They did not wash themselves, sanctify themselves, or justify themselves. It was done to them — and Paul says in what name and by whose Spirit it was done. He is describing baptism. He is not certifying a completed personal transformation; he is naming an accomplished act of God and then reasoning from it.

And reasoning toward what? Toward an imperative — because the Corinthians are still doing the things on the list. That is the entire occasion of the letter. There is a man in that congregation sleeping with his father's wife. They are suing each other in pagan courts. They are getting drunk at the Lord's Supper and humiliating the poor. If "such were some of you" meant the sinner was gone, the remaining ten chapters would be unnecessary.

The same holds for the other favorite proof text. When Paul says that anyone in Christ is a new creation, he is pronouncing a verdict, not describing a measurable improvement — and he pronounces it in a letter where he spends chapters cataloguing his own weakness, and in the same body of writing where he speaks in the present tense about doing the very thing he hates and cries out to be delivered from this body of death.

The old man is not retired. He is under sentence.

Then why bother obeying?

Because the sentence is executed daily, and Luther put that in the catechism where the children could find it.

Ask what baptizing with water signifies, and the answer is that the old Adam in us is to be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and the new man daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever. Daily. The old Adam has to be drowned every single day, and the reason is not subtle: he can swim.

That is the confessional picture of the Christian life, and it is neither the transformation arc nor an excuse. The Formula is clear on both sides of it. Good works follow genuine faith necessarily, as certainly as fruit follows a good tree; and good works are never the ground of justification, never the thing conscience is permitted to rest on, never the evidence that gets me in. The law keeps preaching to the baptized precisely because the old Adam is still in the boat.

Which is exactly what James does with Rahab. He commends her works — real works, dangerous ones, hiding the messengers and sending them out another way — and in the same sentence he calls her the prostitute. Both, at once, in one verse. You could teach the entire doctrine from that clause.

What she actually said

One last thing, and it is the part the shared post skipped.

Before any of this — before the spies get out of the window, before the cord goes up, before the wall comes down — Rahab makes a confession. And it contains not one word about herself.

She says the LORD has given them the land. She says she has heard what He did to the Red Sea, and what He did to Sihon and Og. She says the courage of everyone in Jericho has melted. And then she says the thing that gets her into Hebrews 11: that the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.

She said to the men, “I know the Lord is handing this land over to you. We are absolutely terrified of you, and all who live in the land are cringing before you. 10 For we heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you left Egypt and how you annihilated the two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, on the other side of the Jordan. 11 When we heard the news, we lost our courage, and no one could even breathe for fear of you. For the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on earth below! (NET)

No account of her intentions. No claim about a change of heart. No plan for what she would do differently. She has heard a report about what this God has done, she believes it, and she asks to be dealt with kindly. That is all faith ever is: clinging to a promise about somebody else.

The good news in Joshua 2 is not what God made of Rahab. It is who was born, generations later, at the end of a list the Evangelist refused to clean up — and that He came for exactly the sort of people whose labels are accurate.

If yours had to come off first, the gospel would be for other people.

It isn't.