

# *Studia Biblica Slovaca*

Ročník 12

2020

Číslo 1

Offprint



*Studia Biblica Slovaca* je recenzovaný vedecký časopis zameraný na skúmanie Svätého písma Starého a Nového zákona predovšetkým zo stránky filologickej, historickej, exegetickej a teologickej.

Ročník XII (2020), číslo 1

Vydáva Rímskokatolícka cyrilometodská bohoslovecká fakulta Univerzity Komenského v Bratislave, Kapitulská 26, 814 58 Bratislava 1, IČO 0039786510.

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Časopis je registrovaný a abstrahovaný v ATLA Religion Database, EBSCO, *New Testament Abstracts* ISSN 0028-6877 a *Old Testament Abstracts* ISSN 0364-8591.

S povolením Arcibiskupského úradu v Bratislave zo dňa 3. júna 2014  
Prot. N. 2229/2014

***Studia Biblica Slovaca***  
Printed in Slovakia, 6/2020  
Vychádza dvakrát do roka.  
Cena: 6 €

**ISSN 1338-0141**  
**e-ISSN 2644-4879**  
**EV 3744/09**

# Rahab the Prostitute in the New Testament

*Ladislav Tichý*

## 1 Rahab in the Old Testament

The main subject of the Old Testament Book of Joshua, which is the first book of the so-called “Former prophets”<sup>1</sup> in the Hebrew Bible, is the taking possession of the Promised Land, i.e. the land of Canaan, by the Israelites. During the conquering of the city of Jericho, a crucial part was played by a woman, whose name was Rahab. She was a prostitute by her profession. This Rahab received the Israelite spies who were sent to explore the land and Jericho into her house (Josh 2:1b). She disobeyed the order of the king of Jericho to bring these men out (v. 3). On the contrary, she hid these spies on the roof of her house (see vv. 4-6). From the spies she then solicited the oath to spare her and her whole family during the conquest of Jericho (see vv. 12-14). All of this then became a reality. The two Israelite spies kept the oath and Rahab and all who belonged to her had been brought out and spared (see 6:22-23) before the city of Jericho was burned down (v. 24). In a summarising manner, the Book of Joshua says that Rahab’s “family lived in Israel ever since. For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho” (v. 25)<sup>2</sup>.

## 2 Rahab in the New Testament

The Old Testament Rahab from the Book of Joshua is mentioned three times in the New Testament. It is in the Gospel of Matthew 1:5, in the Letter to

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew Bible consists of three groups of books: the Torah (Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings. The Prophets are then divided into “First” (according to the Hebrew term *rī’šōnīm*) or “Former” Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) and into Later Prophets, which are the “prophetic books” as considered by Christians (without the Book of Daniel, which has its place in the Writings). See, e.g., HARTMAN, *Prophetic books*, 766.

<sup>2</sup> For the texts that contain the narrative about Rahab in the Book of Joshua, see, e.g., the commentaries BUTLER, *Joshua*, 24-35.65-72; COOGAN, *Joshua*, 113-114.116-117.

the Hebrews 11:31, and in the Letter of James 2:25. It is true, that her name is not in the same word form in all three places. Matt 1:5 has the form Ῥαχάβ, but in Heb 11:31 and in Jas 2:25 the form Ῥάβ is to be found. However, we can say that there can hardly be a reasonable doubt that the same person, Rahab is meant in all three places. The form Ῥαχάβ in Matt 1:5 corresponds more to the Hebrew form<sup>3</sup> רַחַב (Josh 2:1 etc.). The form Ῥάβ in Heb 11:31 and in Jas 2:25 is the form that is used in the Septuagint. The Hebrew name רַחַב has the meaning of the adjective “wide, broad”<sup>4</sup>. However, we can also be confronted with the opinion that רַחַב was “not originally a personal name; perhaps the designation of a clan which belonged to the \*בֵּית רַחַב whore-house”<sup>5</sup>.

Let us now look at each of the New Testament passages in its context. We will maintain the order in which the books are traditionally placed in the New Testament because it is not possible to say for certain how the exact chronology of the Gospel of Matthew, the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Letter of James was.

Matt 1:5 is a part of the genealogy (βίβλος γενέσεως, i.e. literally: “the book of origin”) of Jesus Christ, which is the first section of the Gospel of Matthew (1:1-17)<sup>6</sup>. The genealogy has a schematic structure with the repeating descending movement from “father” to “son”. This monotonous structure is “disturbed” by mention of four women (if we do not count the mother of Jesus at the end of v. 16). The four women mentioned are: Tamar in v. 3, Rahab and Ruth in v. 5, and “the wife of Uriah”, i.e. Bathsheba, in v. 6. Matt 1:5 mentions Rahab as the mother of Boaz, whose father was Salmon (according to Ruth 4:13, Boaz was the husband of Ruth). We do not know the source which this genealogical information about Rahab comes from. This at least can well correspond with Josh 6:25 that Rahab’s “family lived in Israel”<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> DAVIES – ALLISON, *Matthew*, 173, have the impression: “It may betray the redactor’s knowledge of the Hebrew”.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. DANKER, *Lexicon*, 312.

<sup>5</sup> HALOT II, 1212.

<sup>6</sup> For the interpretation of this passage, cf. commentaries, e.g., SCHNACKENBURG, *Matthäusevangelium*, 17-19; GNILKA, *Matthäusevangelium*, 2-14; KEENER, *Matthew*, 73-81; FRANCE, *Matthew*, 26-45; DAVIES – ALLISON, *Matthew*, 149-188.

<sup>7</sup> For Rahab’s place and evaluation in the later Jewish tradition, see STRACK – BILLERBECK, *Matthäus*, 20-23. According to this tradition, Rahab became a proselyte. In the Jewish literature, she was considered as the wife of Joshua. It is, however, in Christian literature where Rahab is given as an example. Beyond the New Testament, we can see it

The genealogy poses the question of what reason and meaning of the naming of the four women is. The answer to this question has been sought from Christian antiquity. We cannot see the answer in the necessity of salvation of the world as e.g. Hieronymus thought<sup>8</sup> because at least for Ruth this explanation is not valid. What is common for these four women in genealogy of Jesus Christ is an irregularity of their origin. All these four women did not originally belong to the people of Israel<sup>9</sup>. We can see this presence of four originally pagan women in the genealogy of Jesus Christ as very important for the message of the Gospel of Matthew. No reader of this Gospel can overlook that this Gospel ends with the great commission of the risen Jesus to his disciples. Jesus is sending his disciples into the world with the words: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). However, this final passage of the Gospel of Matthew could seem to average readers surprising because in the main body of this Gospel there are statements of Jesus that express a restricted mission of his disciples and of Jesus himself. So, in 10:5f., Jesus says to his disciples: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. And in 15:24, Jesus rejects the request of the Canaanite woman to heal her daughter with these words: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house Israel”. Rahab and the other three women show that the final passage of the Gospel of Matthew is not fully surprising, and that Israel is only selected as a vanguard of the salvation of all peoples. The four women in the genealogy

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especially in 1 Clem 12:1-8, where not only Rahab’s faith and hospitality are praised, but also her prophecy (12:8). See the Greek text and the English translation by HOLMES, *Apostolic Fathers*, 58-61.

<sup>8</sup> See GNILKA, *Matthäusevangelium*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> This solution is not uncontroversial. See, e.g., BROWN, *Messiah*, 71-74.590-596. Brown would like to see the connection of the four women with Mary, namely in an irregular union of these women with their partners and the important role in God’s plan (73). Similar interpretation was held by SCHNACKENBURG, *Matthäusevangelium*, 18. Brown, however, does not fully exclude the explanation by the foreign origin of the four women (74). In my opinion, this solution is preferable because it seems to be the most convincing explanation even though the Gospel of Matthew does not say it explicitly. That is why according to FRANCE, *Matthew*, 38, “we cannot go beyond conjecture”. This cannot deny the best solution, though. Connecting Mary, mother of Jesus, with the four women in the previous text of the genealogy is at least doubtful and not fully convincing because the evangelist could not leave Mary unmentioned (due to the following passage in Matt 1:18-25) as was possible for the four women.

of Jesus are early signs of the fulfilment of the great commission of Jesus to his disciples at the end of the Gospel of Matthew<sup>10</sup>.

Heb 11:31 is part of chapter 11 which is dedicated to the theme of “faith”<sup>11</sup>. At the beginning of this chapter (v. 1), the author of the letter gives some sort of a definition of faith and then he names a series of examples by listing persons from the Old Testament. It is not surprising that the author names such great Old Testament figures as Abraham (vv. 8.17) and Moses (vv. 23-24). It is interesting, however, that in v. 31 as the final example he also mentions “Rahab the prostitute”. She is the only woman besides Sarah (see v. 11) that is named in Heb 11. Heb 11:31 says: “By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace”. The faith of Rahab is clearly expressed in Josh 2:11 where she says to the Israelite spies: “LORD, your God, is God in heaven above and on earth below”. In Heb 11:31, Rahab’s profession “prostitute” is not avoided as we can see it, e.g., in Flavius Josephus (see *Ant.* 5.8 and 5.30, where Josephus speaks about Rahab’s inn [καταγώγιον], in which the spies sought their refuge and where they later rescued Rahab with her whole family<sup>12</sup>). The Letter to the Hebrews does not certainly approve Rahab’s profession (cf. the warning [accompanying the exhortation to honour marriage and keep the marriage bed undefiled] in Heb 13:4b: “God will judge sexually immoral people [πόρνοους]<sup>13</sup> and adulterers”) <sup>14</sup>, but Rahab can serve as a challenging comparison for the addressees of the Letter in this sense:

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<sup>10</sup> It is clear that also the narrative about the visit of the wise men from the East to Bethlehem in Matt 2:1-12 can be understood as expressing the idea of the salvation of the Gentiles.

<sup>11</sup> For the exegesis of this text with the illustrative examples of faith, see, e.g., ATTRIDGE, *Hebrews*, 305-345; BACKHAUS, *Hebräerbrief*, 375-403; KOESTER, *Hebrews*, 458-511; MITCHELL, *Hebrews*, 227-256; THOMPSON, *Hebrews*, 232-243.

<sup>12</sup> See JOSEPHUS, *Antiquities*, 164-165, and 174-175. In note *b* on page 165 it is explained that Josephus follows the Targum on Josh 2:1, where the noun *pundekita* designating the profession of Rahab means “inn-keeper”.

<sup>13</sup> The noun for the “profession” of Rahab πόρνη “prostitute” (see Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25) has the same etymological origin as πόρνος “fornicator, sexually immoral person”, even though the author of the Letter to the Hebrews certainly wanted to include diverse cases of sexual immorality.

<sup>14</sup> The author of the Letter to the Hebrews undoubtedly agreed with the apostle Paul who “granted the propriety of sexual relations within marriage, but not outside it” (KOESTER, *Hebrews*, 565, n. 470).

if even a prostitute acted in faith, how could they be without faith<sup>15</sup>? The author of Heb mentions also another quality that accompanied the action of Rahab. It is “peace”: “she had received the spies in peace” (11:31). However, the narrative about Rahab in Josh does not mention the “receiving in peace”. Obviously, the author of Heb connects “peace” with “hospitality”. And Rahab undoubtedly showed hospitality. In 13:2, the addressees of the Letter are remembered that they should not “neglect hospitality”. Already in 12:14, they were instructed that “peace” must accompany their life: “Pursue peace with everyone”. How important the value of peace is for Heb we can also see from the formulation in 13:20, where the concluding prayer of the Letter for the addressees invokes “the God of peace” for help.

Jas 2:25 is part of the arguably most discussed passage of the Letter of James. Verses 14-26 treat the question of faith and works<sup>16</sup>. The whole passage is concluded with the statement in v. 26: “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead”. In the preceding v. 25, the author of the Letter gives Rahab (after the example of Abraham in vv. 21-23) as an example of justification on the basis of works: “And similarly, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another way?” There is no explicit mention that Rahab believed (unlike in the example of Abraham in v. 23 with the quotation of Gen 15:6: “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”). However, the idea of faith follows from the context. This means that although Heb 11:31 speaks explicitly about the faith of Rahab and Jas 2:25 formulates that she was justified “by works” there is no contradiction between these two. From the context of Jas 2:25, we can conclude that Rahab had “living faith”. This is clearly confirmed by the statement in the following v. 26: “faith without works is dead”. If “faith without works is dead”, then faith that is visible in works must correspond to a living faith. We could perhaps ask whether Abraham in v. 24 is given as an example for Jews and Rahab in v. 25 as an example for pagans<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See KOESTER, *Hebrews*, 505.

<sup>16</sup> For the interpretation of this pericope, see commentaries, e.g., MUSSNER, *Jakobusbrief*, 127-157; JOHNSON, *James*, 236-250; MOO, *James*, 118-144; BURCHARD, *Jakobusbrief*, 109-133; HARTIN, *James*, 149-171; PHILLIPS, *James*, 82-93; ALLISON, *James*, 425-508.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. MUSSNER, *Jakobusbrief*, 151, n. 7, who articulates this question. According to Mussner, the message would then be that faith must always “cooperate” with the works of love, regardless of whether a Christian is of Jewish or of pagan origin. Mussner sees this

Then the irrelevance of the origin from Jewry or from paganism for a Christian would be clearly expressed. However, this conclusion is certainly valid even without a clear positive answer to the formulated question concerning the relation of Abraham and Rahab. Moreover, this decisive connection of “faith” and “works” is fully in conformity with the position of the apostle Paul in his letters. We can see it very clearly, e.g., from the theologically very important formulation in Gal 5:6 where the apostle Paul says that “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love”<sup>18</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Old Testament woman Rahab from the Book of Joshua, who was a prostitute, but who helped and protected the Israelite spies during the conquering of Jericho, is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Matt 1:5; Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25). These mentions may seem only marginal and relatively unimportant. However, a summarising conclusion based on our analysis can say that all three places where Rahab the prostitute is mentioned in the New Testament can be seen as a clear supporting force to the essential theological message of the whole New Testament. On the one hand it is – at least according to the most convincing interpretation – the idea of the Gospel that is destined for all nations (Matt 1:5), and on the other hand, it is the essential importance of faith that must be active in works (Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25).

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explanation as “worthy of consideration”. From another point of view, JOHNSON, *James*, 245, asks: “Is it accidental that the figures of Abraham and Rahab correspond to the needy «brother and sister» in 2:15?” We can in any case say that the author of the Letter wanted to give examples of both genders.

<sup>18</sup> For the detailed interpretation of this verse, see, e.g., MUSSNER, *Galaterbrief*, 351-354.

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*Shrnutí*

Rachab, která byla nevěstkou v Jerichu (Joz 2,1) a ukryla dva izraelské zvědy (vv. 4-6), a proto byla uchráněna s celým svým domem před zkázou (6,17-25), je jmenována na třech místech v Novém zákoně: Mt 1,5; Žid 11,31 a Jak 2,25. Příspěvek se snaží tyto krátké zmínky analyzovat, vysvětlit a poukázat na teologický význam těchto textů. Pro teologické poselství Matoušova evangelia je výmluvné, že Rachab je jmenována mezi předky Ježíše Krista. A neméně významné jsou zmínky v listech. V nich je Rachab, přes své hříšné řemeslo, dána za příklad víry (Žid 11,31) a skutků (Jak 2,25). Mezi oběma texty neexistuje protiklad, třebaže je „víra“ v jednom a „skutky“ ve druhém, protože obojí patří k sobě, jak to např. vyjádřil apoštol Pavel ve svém teologicky velmi důležitém prohlášení v Gal 5,6: „rozhodující je víra, která se projevuje láskou“.

*Klíčová slova:* Kniha Jozue, Rachab, Matoušovo evangelium, List Židům, List Jakubův.

*Summary*

Rahab who was a prostitute in Jericho (Josh 2:1) and hid two Israelite spies (vv. 4-6) being therefore spared with her whole house (6:17-25) is mentioned three times in the New Testament (Matt 1:5; Heb 11:31; Jas 2:25). This contribution tries to analyze and explain these relatively short mentions and seeks to point out the theological significance of these texts. It is significant for the message of the Gospel of Matthew that Rahab is named among the ancestors of Jesus Christ. And the mentions in the letters seem to be especially important. There Rahab the prostitute, despite her sinful enterprise, is given as an example of faith (Heb 11:31) and of works (Jas 2:25). There is no real contradiction between these two texts (“faith” in one and “works” in the other) because both can be united as it was expressed, e.g., by the apostle Paul in his theologically very important proclamation in Gal 5:6: “the only thing that matters is faith working through love”.

*Keywords:* Book of Joshua, Rahab, Gospel of Matthew, Letter to the Hebrews, Letter of James.

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## Obsah

### Štúdie

***Emanuel TOV***

Niektoré hlavné postavy Izraela u Skorších prorokov  
v tradícii Septuaginty ..... 1-23

***Peter DUBOVSKÝ***

Porovnanie Eliášových a Elizeových zázrakov so zázrakmi  
Ježiša Krista ..... 24-42

***Ladislav TICHÝ***

Nevěstka Rachab v Novém zákoně ..... 43-50

***Petr MAREČEK***

Eliáš. Jeho role a důležitost v Lukášově evangeliu ..... 51-70

***Helena PANCZOVÁ***

Alegorická exegéza gréckych filozofov ako pozadie helenistickej  
exegézy Biblie. Literárno-kultúrny prehľad ..... 71-102

**Abstrakty a recenzie** ..... 103-117

**Správy a oznamy** ..... 118-124

## Contents

### Treaties

*Emanuel Tov*

Some Major Israelite Figures in the Former Prophets in  
the Tradition of the Septuagint ..... 1-23

*Peter DUBOVSKÝ*

From Miracle-makers Elijah and Elisha to Jesus and Apocrypha ..... 24-42

*Ladislav TICHÝ*

Rahab the Prostitute in the New Testament ..... 43-50

*Petr MAREČEK*

Elijah: His Role and Importance in the Gospel of Luke ..... 51-70

*Helena PANCZOVÁ*

Allegorical Exegesis of the Greek Philosophers as Background of  
Hellenistic Biblical Exegesis: Literary-cultural Survey ..... 71-102

**Abstracts and Reviews** ..... 103-117

**Communications and References** ..... 118-124