

ATHALYA BRENNER-IDAN

*I am Rahab, the Broad*<sup>1</sup>

*Foreword*

Many critics and readers are devoted to understanding the bible “as it was”, that is, they reconstruct implied entities to their hearts’ pleasure and purpose: an implied audience, milieu, culture, religion, theology, an imagined author with whose help to interpret the biblical texts. They usually do it with a certain amount of confidence, in a certain accepted, conventional scholarly –or pastoral– style, and insist that their interpretation is objective, historical, linguistically correct – certainly dissimilar to fiction.

But I often wonder: what would biblical narratives look like if rewritten with modern and postmodern concerns openly displayed rather than dimmed or totally denied in the name of scholarship or religion? Current concerns of contemporary bible and literature critics might include issues of authorship and readership, or literary theory in general. Or the extrabiblical concerns of some readers/ interpreters themselves with nationalism, religion and war, ethnicity, historiography and historicity as once told, [post]colonialism, ageism, and –ultimately– issues of gender and gender construction. What would happen, in short, if we stopped pretending that current

1 I testi qui riportati comprendono il cap.5 del libro di Athalya Brenner, *I Am... Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 2005, pp. 82-98, più una prefazione (*Foreword*) e una postfazione (*Afterword*) che Athalya Brenner ha scritto ora per incorniciare la storia di Rahab, e che qui compaiono all’inizio e alla fine del capitolo originale. Un ringraziamento particolare ad Athalya Brenner per averci donato questi testi così significativi per la rivista «Storia delle donne», e all’editrice Fortress per aver acconsentito alla pubblicazione del capitolo (Nota delle curatrici).

affairs, and various modes of interpretative engagement, should be banished from academic debate? In the case of the Hebrew bible, what may happen if we tried something else: sometimes, instead of writing about a text from the outside we shall explain it from within: adding fictional or fictionalized elements, at times – but how different is the work of some scholars to that? By frankly retelling a biblical story, using our regular intellectual and educational tools, voicing our own concerns rather than trying to work solely on the concerns of the implied biblical author in his (yes, mostly his) implied time and place, we may arrive at insights that will perhaps not highlight the past, but will help us in the present and future.

Performing such an exercise, it seems to me, is an exercise in light seriousness and is especially suited to the interpretation by retelling of women's stories in the bible. This is so because, by comparison to men-centered stories, biblical woman figures have much less social presence and textual voice. And if so, what better way to enliven their stories, their figures, for us than to fictionalize their autobiographies, as if from their own mouth? Why should such a wonderful trope be limited to other literary art forms, such as poetry and novels and theater plays, and denied to the academic critic as a valid work tool?

Therefore, the following “story”, or narrative, that you shall read below is an attempt to rewrite a biblical narrative, focused on the narratologically prominent figure in this story, from her viewpoint, by way of redressing the gender balance, spoken (explanation below) in the first-person mode. This will be a partly fictive [auto]biography, the revised and revisited story of *Joshua* chapters 2 and 6: the story of Rahab the whore from Jericho and the Israelite spies.

Since the 1990's I've been doing theoretical work on female voices submerged in/by the Hebrew bible texts – mostly written by and for males, read and forwarded and interpreted by males. From this theoretical perch, the jump to autobiographical pretense was not difficult. (I hasten to add that other feminist bible scholars resorted to this trope too, either in the form of a tale or letters). Rahab was a natural candidate for such treatment: a strong female figure, resourceful and clever, but also paradoxical, a whore yet incorporated into Jewish postbiblical important lineages and the Christian New Testament lineage of Jesus. I've revis[it]ed her figure several times, the last of which is the one reproduced here.<sup>2</sup>

2 From Athalya Brenner, *I Am ... Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*, Minneapolis, Fortress 2005, pp. 83-98.

In that book, in order to supply a suitable literary framework, I got 12 (not an accidental number, of course) biblical female figures whose death is not mentioned, which means they live forever, to come to a contemporary academic-like conference in a never-never island, and there to tell their “own” stories in their “own” words. Rahab is one of them, Chapter 5, and this frame explains –at least in part– how “she” reconstructs her story.

Playful, yes; but seriously so.

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The following is an attempt to retell a biblical narrative, “my” narrative, as it were, focused on me, the narratologically prominent figure in this story, from “my” viewpoint, by way of redressing the usual biblical balance. This will be the revis[it]ed story of *Joshua* 2 and 6 – the story of yours truly, Rahab and the Israelite spies.

You may remember the story, as it appears in the Holy Book. After Moses’ death the Israelites, under Joshua’s leadership, prepared to enter the Promised Land from the East. Joshua, who earlier in the wilderness had served as a spy together with Caleb, sent two spies to gather information, and especially, to gauge the mood of the inhabitants. They came to my house. Word reached the king, and he demanded that I turn them in. Instead, I hid them and then sent them away safely, asking in return to save me and my family when they conquered our city. They agreed. Later, when they took the city, they fulfilled their promise and made me integrate into their society – but let me now give my own version of the events.

My real name is ... it doesn’t matter what it is. I *do* have a proper first name, although no lineage in “my” story. But even my first name has been forgotten, or perhaps suppressed by the biblical writers. My nickname, the one that supplanted my real name until the real name had been deleted from all the official documentation is –as you all know– “Rahab”. Now this, in Hebrew, in case you ladies have forgotten, means the “wide” or “broad” one. Please do not think for a moment that this “wideness” refers to my being far from slim. No, although that may be true as well even in those far-off days I never lacked for food in my childhood, being a member of the upper mercantile, landholding class and later an enterprising professional woman. There is a sexual pun here, those of you with a little bit of remembered or recalled Hebrew and imagination are right.

From antiquity on, this is how I was known. Listen to this passage from the Jewish Midrash known as *Sifre-Zuta* (10):

Rabbi Yehudah says, she has four names of disrepute. Her name, Rahab the whore, says it all. Another thing, Rahab the whore because she fornicated with the city people from within, and from the bandits from without, since it is said that «her house was in the wall» and «she sits in the wall» (*Joshua* 2,15). Another thing, Rahab the whore since she was a Canaanite, and there were no more evil and wicked people than the Canaanites. Another thing, Rahab the whore since she was from the people of Jericho, those about whom it is written that they should be demolished and banned (*Deuteronomy* 20,17).

Don't you find it interesting? On the one hand, I save their people and they acknowledge it, in writing. On the other hand, they play with and expand on the sexual possibilities suggested by the text. Do we forget that prostitution –in this case, female prostitution– exists because of simple supply and demand processes? At any rate, the Hebrew scribes who wrote down that they imagined as “my” story preferred to introduce me by that nickname. The Broad.

Those scribes often suppressed women's names in their stories: this praxis made the woman figure seem less real, less important. A basic literary technique that suited the writers' and scribes' purposes, as bible scholars Carol Meyers and Adele Reinhartz have pointed out. The male sages of that motley group, members of which wrote stories later incorporated into their sacred writings, enjoyed the vulgar connotations. This is how I am known, although later generations elevated me to the status of matriarch. And I, from where I am, from where I have been all this time (I refuse to divulge my exact age, female wiles, so what? Stereotypic, so what?), I can laugh and cry in equal proportions. But let me tell my own story from my own perspective, even some of the suppressed parts, in the order of events I remember well. As they happened. From my viewpoint, rather than from theirs. And if I rewrite history here –who am I to deny that a little bit of that will occur, it always does– so be it.

I was, am (my afterlife in the canonized literatures of the belief systems that later came to be known as Judaism and Christianities allows me the present tense, so does my standing here today), an ordi-

nary upper-middle class girl. My mother was a housewife and mother; my father was in the textile business. Really, let me be true to my origins: he was in the *shmate* business. Let me digress and elaborate a little on this. You must have noticed that, in my story, flax –call it linen if you will, if you’re fashion-conscious– occupies an important place. Now, while it is certainly true that processing flax may have been a traditional woman’s job in those days, it is perhaps surprising to find raw flax on a bordello’s roof in quantities sufficient for hiding one or two persons (*Joshua* 2, 6) – even when the flax is needed for the plot, even when a realistic picture should not be expected. We may therefore assume, by way of filling a gap, that I was somehow familiar with flax processing as a profession or trade. A similar echo underlies, perhaps, the insistence of some Jewish midrashic sources that a guild of white linen workers, mentioned in 1 *Chronicles* 4, 21 as a family (“house of byssus work”), was descended from me (see: *Sifre Zuta*10; *Ruth Rabbah* 2; and more). But I have digressed here too much and will return to this as my story unfolds, below. This is just background.

I grew up with the smell of flax and expensive cloth, international trade, political gossip. We had lands and a town house inside the walled city. I had brothers and sisters; I was the eldest. I was born and raised in Jericho, an oasis, a very ancient city near the Dead Sea not far from Jerusalem, This town still exists today, a village really, but it has been in existence for thousands of years before and after the events I am recounting here. Nowadays it is Palestinian, it used to be Israeli; before that it was Jordanian-Arab; in my time it was labeled Canaanite. I loved it and I still do. A person is but the format of her or his native landscape, as the poet says.

My childhood was uneventful. I was an obedient child, good looking, pleasant. I loved my siblings and honored my parents, as prescribed in our law tablets (and theirs; I mean the group that became known as “Hebrews” and evolved into “Israelites”, later still “Jews”). I looked forward to a stable life like my mother’s, with a husband and children, eventually grandchildren, under my own palm trees (neither the proverbial vine nor the fig tree grows well in our immediate geo-topographic neighborhood). When was that? Ah, about twelve to thirteen hundred years before the man Jesus, described as a descendant of mine, was born: for that, have a look at what is known as the New Testament (*Matthew* 1, 5-6). Or perhaps I confuse the dates; certainly, this happened all too long ago to remember exactly when. But dates apart, events are still vivid in my mind.

History –as it sometimes would– intervened into my modest, internalized vision of a future, conventional domestic bliss. Suddenly, it seemed, there were waves of invaders from the southeast and the northeast and the east. Hungry, unruly crowds of desert and margin shepherd-warriors would descend on our arable lands and unwallled towns, the desert-encircled agricultural hinterland of our marvelously cultured, ancient, walled city. They would demolish or capture everything in sight. They also, sometimes, had the nasty habit of killing all males, sparing women and children only, or killing all human beings in the name of their religion. On such occasions, taking captives and keeping them alive was not for them. They recorded the practice in the name of a jealous god, in their holy writs, much later (*Deuteronomy* 20, 10-18; *Joshua* 6-7). A much later doctor/philosopher that they acronymed “Rambam”, “Maimonides” for the rest of the world, further coded this practice of holy war by stating (in his *Kings* 6, 4) conditions and targets for demolishing, killing, and banning enemies.<sup>3</sup> In that, their attitude was very similar to that of some contemporary Palestinians, although without the martyrdom halo attached to suicidal attacks on the enemy. At any rate, the invaders did make an exception in the case of female virgins, though, especially the young and beautiful ones (*Deuteronomy* 21). But let’s not dwell on the fate of those, too unpleasant to recall, although these virgins’ lives were spared.

This process of slow infiltration, in waves, from the east, happened over a few decades with monotonous regularity, usually in the spring and summer and during the abundant harvest time. The crops from the hinterland, the ones we depended on, were increasingly lost to us. Inflation and scarcity of food became commonplace. Gradually, the business that fed us all became paralyzed. My father lost most of his merchandise and property. Most of the younger, marriageable men were maimed or died in attempts to stop the seasonal attacks of the invaders from the eastern desert, or they were captured and killed. In addition, life became so boring and sad!

None of my brothers and sisters was ever taught how to earn a living outside the family firm, which, in fact, was so well established that while it lasted it nearly ran itself on its own accord, sustaining all of us in the extended household. In fact, our own models of urban, upper class, and otherwise household arrangements were taken

3 If you want the witness of a modern critic, see Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1995.

up later by the Hebrews themselves, as they became “Israelites” and established themselves as conquistadors of their promised land. This gradual process of long duration, as you may imagine, entailed what they saw as contamination, the learning and internalization of our ways, while at the same time attempting to annihilate us physically. But I’m digressing and should go back to my story that –apart from unavoidable quasi-philosophical reflections– I’m attempting to retell chronologically.

At this stage of the terror, we began to feel helpless. Our family compound, usually so joyful, became silent – especially my mother, who had hitherto spent a life of relative leisure.

Something about my mother and her influence in her children’s lives, in passing, since the Hebrew bible seldom if ever discloses anything about daughter-mother relationships: it is as if mothers are dysfunctional with their daughters, if not necessarily with their sons. Where is Dinah’s mother when Dinah was raped (*Genesis* 38)? Whatever happened to Jephthah’s wife when her husband sacrifices his daughter to a god who doesn’t prevent this monstrosity (*Judges* 11), as he prevented Abraham from sacrificing Isaac to him – and for that matter, where is Sarah then (*Genesis* 22)? And where is Zelophehad’s wife when his five daughters, named, praise be, ask for their paternal inheritance from Moses when there are no sons to inherit (*Numbers* 27, 1-11; 37)? Where indeed? You can find these mothers in later Jewish midrash perhaps, but not in the Hebrew bible. My mother was my father’s only wife. Her name was Yarchit, derived from our word for “moon”, a word that is evident in the name of our beloved city Jericho, «properly pronounced *yericho*. Although the Hebrews often claimed that we Canaanites were morally inferior to them, sexually corrupt like our Ammonite and Moabite cousins, females and males alike great philanderers, bigamy and polygamy were very seldom practiced, even by the well-to-do. My mother, then, was my father’s only love both emotionally and legally –at least as far as we children knew– which was a source of great comfort and stability for us. She was a lady of leisure, then, if you discount the fact that she was almost always pregnant. She gave birth to twelve babies, eight of whom survived beyond early childhood; this, given our usual infant mortality rates of two infants out of five reaching the age of ten years old, was pretty good. My mother loved us, and she was patient with us regardless of gender. She didn’t think that «whoever teaches her daughter Torah is as if she taught her nonsense». Bourgeois values can come in handy, for girls, I mean. My mother’s bourgeois

values dictated that girls should be proficient in math and rhetoric as well as fine, feminine arts and skills that were conventional, so that they could help in the family business. Literacy was considered a basic requirement for both genders in our household.

Things gradually became worse: a real *intifada* (uprising). Our country relatives left their homes and came to ours, since all their property had been vandalized or taken over, and they feared for their lives. It was rumored that the infiltrators/invaders were a cruel crowd; they took whatever they could: chattels, animals, food. They burned and destroyed whatever they couldn't take with them. They were, let's risk saying it aloud, barbarians by our refined, urban standards. They dressed unfashionably, poorly, with no taste and no care. Most of them were illiterate: in fact, the groups that attacked us, the groups that later forged a national identity labeled "Israelites", were largely illiterate until so much later, probably the eighth century BCE at the earliest, as agreed by many scholars. Their women and children were socially inferior to adult males, especially to the so-called elders – not always chronologically old or older than others, but certainly invested with an authority attributed to (meta-physical) aged wisdom. They had strange religious practices, such as pretending to worship one invisible male god while, at home, paying homage to symbolical statuettes of other male or female gods, whose business it was to care for the family's welfare. But they were invincible, they pressed forward, behaving as if our ancient and civilized land belonged to them, so great was their self-conviction that our own people became scared and ran. This is the power of religious and political propaganda, you hear it often enough, it's reiterated in and by the media, it acquires a life, sheer repetition convinces, you begin to believe in your own inferiority. Furthermore, we hadn't had war for decades, we had been so peacefully intent on our good life. We were civic and peaceful, rather gentle: we were nothing like our kin neighbors to the east of the Jordan, the Moabites who would sacrifice infants for the common good, as they did at times of military danger. Remember their king, Mesha, who sacrificed his own firstborn son on his city's wall in order to stop the Israelite invasion (2 *Kings* 3). This worked: even the bible half-admits that the Israelite invasion was checked. Or like the traders from the north, our seafaring cousins the Phoenicians, who sacrificed infants regularly, in order to ensure the welfare of the community: archaeological traces of this practice are much in evidence. But we abhorred such practices. And we didn't know how to fight back and how to react – first



to the Hebrew infiltration of our hinterland from the east, then to their continued presence and to their destructive behaviour.

On the other hand, these people's physiognomy and language were undeniably close to ours. Had we been a racially prejudiced society (but as traders sitting on an important oasis in a route from east to southwest, we could not afford to be), we would have said that they must have shared some ethnic gene pool with us. We were wondering how we could exploit the similarities in order to contain or repel them. But meanwhile food was becoming very scarce. Commodities, international trade, communications came to an almost complete halt. My father's house, our kinship unit, could no longer function, as it should have –this was its *raison d'être*; we're not talking emotions here– as an economic unit successfully for its various consanguineous and other members.

I was just coming of age. I was quite well educated, as I mentioned above. Our parents taught us at first, and then we had tutors: once again, this parental home education system, in which both father and mother functioned as teachers, was later copied by the Israelites, as evident in their sacred writings (*Proverbs* 1-9). The women too knew about textiles, helped in the family business. This wish for everyone to be involved in the family business dictated that everyone, female as well as male, would be well educated, at least enough to function as international traders. We were introduced in court; we had social connections. We still owned property, including real estate. But we had no food. And together with my sisters, older and younger, I could find nobody to marry: it became so bad that up to seven women would beseech a single man to marry them, for food and honor, as stated by the prophet Isaiah in a different context centuries later:

And seven women would get hold  
of one man on that day  
saying, we shall eat our food  
and wear our dress  
just let your name be ours  
get rid of our shame (*Isaiah* 4, 1).

Gradually it dawned on me that the only way to gain some livelihood for myself and for my family would be to open a brothel: such institutions flourish, especially during hard times. With an eye to the changing situation, with the knowledge that ultimately the invaders would covet our walled city, with cold calculation, I asked my par-

ents to have the lease of a house by the city wall. I was given a house from the family estate. I turned it into an organized, clean establishment. What can a woman do? Sell her body and the bodies of other women, when all else fails; there's always a demand for that. If you have to buy food and shelter, save to maintain children, support your family, pay your dues to the cult, repay vows, and there's no one to help you, you resort to the last commodity you have: your sexuality – and morality be hanged.

We had a nice byline in hospitality, food selling too. In fact, some of the later Jewish commentators insist I was just that, a food seller and an innkeeper: the word for “whore” in Hebrew, *zonah*, is phonetically similar to the word for “food” and “feeding”. This is nonsense, of course: prostitution, because of male cupidity, is a much more stable and viable occupation than even food selling. That later generations attempted to emphasize my choice, or obliterate it, is beside the historical point. Listen to this. It gives me pleasure that several later Jewish scholars, from the translators into Aramaic to medieval Jewish Commentators on the bible, insisted that I was an innkeeper and food seller. Others felt a little offended on the one hand, and yet stressed by the unnatural explanation of “whore” as food seller. One commentator takes a middle position between the two explanations, “innkeeper” and “whore”. He states that (1) a woman's modesty is ultimately affected by the things she sees, the people she meets, *etc.*, if and when she's an innkeeper; and (2) most female innkeepers had been prostitutes before starting the inn business. Josephus Flavius, that treacherous ex-military Jewish leader who became a Roman dependent in the second century BCE, and a scholar, in his rewriting of biblical history (*Antiquities* 5, 1.2) forgoes my profession (which he never mentions) and designates me an innkeeper from beginning to end. It seems that designating me as an innkeeper was motivated by the ideological attempt of exonerating a future foremother from a shady past – I did get to become a glorious figure later on, but we shall return to this. And also, as we shall see, Flavius did this to whitewash the Hebrew spies somewhat. It must have seemed better to present them, piously, as resting at an inn than beginning their mission at a brothel. Once again, we are getting to that in a few minutes. But, believe me, there's no shame in what I did, under the circumstances. I did run a brothel. In addition, we – I and my girls, good girls, from good homes, suffering the same hardships that I did – processed flax regularly, to help father, since all better textiles could not be sold by then.

Pretty soon men started to flock to my “house”, Rahab’s house, The Broad’s house, from Jericho as well as from outside it (as long as the roads were open). In spite of my relatively young age, I was the madam. I ran the show. I shall leave aside the question of whether or not I supplied sexual services myself, although some later generations of scholars were convinced that I did. The Jewish sages said: «There was no great man or official in the land with whom Rahab did not have intercourse.» At any rate, my girls were clean and discreet. Knowledge about abortifacients and birth control, officially denied but preserved as female oral traditions, was turned into praxis, thus preventing complications for girls and customers alike. Did you know that female traditions about birth control, mostly of organic and vegetal extraction, persist until this day and at times are scientifically mass produced by big name chemical laboratories, without acknowledgment to the traditional source, of course!

In short, my business flourished. I now knew everybody, and everybody knew me. My family was both shamed and ashamed. Surely you do know that, in the Orient, a woman’s modesty is a man’s honor; a woman’s sexual immodesty, or what is construed as such, is a man’s shame; a woman’s shame is her exposure – to public gaze, to gossip, to allegations of misconduct. So my family, dominated by males, of course, at least as it seemed, was shamed but no longer hungry. Situated as I was by the city gate and meeting (so to speak) many travelers and politicians and other imminent males, as well as ordinary people (I ran an egalitarian establishment, modest rates, value for money, few if ever any questions), my political awareness grew by the day. Through listening to many conversations, I came to realize that those invaders, those “Hebrews” as they called themselves, might prevail, might inherit the land. I began to realize that this might indeed happen. Not so much because of their wit, neither because of their potent god (they only had one god, didn’t admit to any goddess at all –hard to imagine at the time– or so they said; later evidence pointed to the existence of goddesses, on the level of household worship as well as public worship), but because of our complacency, our blindness, our fat and peaceful ways. A scandal about the reinforcement of the city wall, not done properly by the appointed contractor, and corruption in the matter of hand-thrown defense stones (communal warehouses found mysteriously half-empty), were unsettling. Stones were an important weapon. See *Judges 9* for the (Canaanite) woman who kills Abimelek by throwing a grindstone at him from a city wall. For stones as weapons in gen-

eral see also the book by Yigael Yadin,<sup>4</sup> who should know, he was a general, son of an archaeologist and an archaeologist himself, once upon a time the chief-of-stuff of the renewed Israeli state, and a politician. Throwing stones are also mentioned in Ugaritic literature as “hand stones”. So the scandal –actually finding out that the stones supposed to be stored in warehouses and ready for military usage of deterring enemies while in siege of our walled city, those same stones were sold to and by traders for building purposes and were not available for defense purposes– was really shocking. And I was uneasy in my heart.

Well, one day in the early summer two strangers came to my establishment. Their version of the story or, rather, the story as seen from the heavy ideological perspective of their source group, is written in the book called after their chieftain, *Joshua* (chapter 2), as I mentioned before. I knew they were strangers right away. Local dress codes couldn’t be applied, they were so poorly and peculiarly dressed. The language, though intelligible, sounded a bit quaint and archaic, sort of a bygone language, an odd dialect. They weren’t particularly clean. Their skin was rough. One of the two pretended to be a traveling carpenter, the other a traveling potter. These were their cover stories. But their act was not convincing. They were watchful, observant, conversational. I had a hunch that they were spies for Joshua’s small crowd: rumor had it anyway that Joshua’s crowd, the Hebrews, were nearing the city. They had done their best to run a propaganda campaign, trying to convince the city’s king and council that that their army was a huge “national” army and that we should surrender to them without battle. Their sage Rambam (Maimonides) claimed centuries later that before he entered the land Joshua sent to the land’s inhabitants, that is to us among others, three messages. The first, whoever wants to flee should flee. The second, whoever wants to make peace should make peace. The third, whoever wants to make war will do so at their own peril. The king and his council laughed. So here were the spies, I thought, here it comes.

But what kind of spies were they, in fact? Inadequate and comical, real jokers and fumbling idiots, I should say. They had no proper cover story: traveling artisans, indeed! They didn’t look like traveling artisans, not at all, no tools, hardly any baggage, hands not rough

4 Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Study*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1963.

enough. They did not speak the dialect of Gibeon, from where they claimed to originate and to have come. They referred to each other as “brother”, as often portrayed in the Hebrew bible, pretending to be real blood kin but it was just part of their ideological identity: they displayed no kin resemblance. They didn’t even step out for a walk, to inspect the city walls for instance: later historians, such as Josephus Flavius, make them do just that, once again in order to save their dubious honor. Please take my word: they never did that. In fact the heat was so unbearable that they didn’t even take advantage of the early afternoon breeze to learn about their surroundings. They stayed put. They drank a lot. They had their fun with the girls. They appreciated my food. They paid and tipped, rather lavishly I thought, using our local currency. Then they went to sleep, as if they were safe in their own territory. They seemed careless. And yet, and yet – there was something forceful about them, somewhat menacing and aggressive yet at the same time curious and selfish. So I spied on them and watched them. Discreetly, as is my habit.

The king’s men came towards evening. «You’re harboring Hebrew spies», they said, «hand them over». Now, I’ll never fully understand why I denied any knowledge of them. The denial was instinctive: my motives, for whatever they were worth, could be analyzed later. At the time, they were of no consequence. I reminded the captain of the guards, briskly, that his wife could be told about his recent visits to my establishment. He turned away together with his men, not searching the premises properly. When notified of the king’s men’s arrival, I’d quickly arranged to hide the Hebrew “spies” on the roof, under some flax drying in preparation for its processing by my girls. The Hebrew men were lying there, frightened and silent. They were in my hands. I had to decide what to do.

By nightfall I’d made my decision. I’ll help them escape – on condition that they promised me that, if they conquered the city, they would grant political asylum to me and to the rest of my family. Please understand their stories present me as being full of faith in their eventual success, hanging on the power of the omnipotent, single god. They make me even present a speech to that effect (*Joshua* 2, 9-13). The truth was different. Although at the time I doubted whether they’d ever manage to conquer the city, I decided to let them go –if they give me their word– as insurance against such an eventuality. I can hear you think, But that’s treason to your source community! I can answer, ideals aside, that I was beginning to suspect that nevertheless, in spite of my hope and in the face of events,

“on the ground”, in spite of the unevenness of force and strength, political and material survival were at stake. To all intents and purposes, I was by then acting as the head of my father’s house: the responsibility hung heavily upon me. I was no convert to the new religion, although, in their *Mekhilta*, they stated that I did convert to Judaism after forty years of harlotry during the wilderness period. After all, the new religion was a religion without goddesses, and this turned me off. Presentations of me as such a convert, for instance in the Christian text called *Letter to the Hebrews* (11, 30-31), make me chuckle to myself. I acted rather than “believed” (*James* 2, 25) because I could act, because my vanity rejoiced in the possibility that I could affect local history, because I too love to be childish and play spies, because I love to defy authority (my own king’s authority, in this case). And the thrill of danger! And the sense of revenge! I remembered the gossip about my “house”, the shaming – as in other Eastern societies, shaming in ours had a devastating effect, especially the shaming of women in the name of male honor, the shaming of my family. But, primarily, I did it because I wanted this extra insurance. What can a woman do?

So I extracted a promise from the so-called spies. That was indeed a richly humorous scene. I had them hanging on a rope, between heaven and earth, speaking at length and demanding an oath before letting them off on the external side of the city wall. Luckily I knew the schedule of the city guards’ patrols; I could give the spies directions for a temporary hideaway. Before I lowered them to the ground, on the other side of the wall, they did give me their promise to save me and my household and family from extinction if and when they conquered our city.

So, you may ask, how sure were you that they’d keep a promise thus extracted under duress? I wasn’t, actually. An oath is an oath, though. According to Josephus again, the spies’ oath was ratified by Joshua, Eleazar the high priest, and the elders’ council, hence was absolutely valid and secure. Besides, the whole thing was a long shot. And I was enjoying myself, playing with males’ life and death.

You know the rest of it, as told in *Joshua* 2 and 6. The two men managed to escape. They went back to their leader, Joshua, and reported to him. How they glossed over their behavior, their inadequacy as spies, I don’t know. They managed to convince their leader that all the inhabitants of the land were persuaded of the Hebrews’ might. Later, actually, they managed to conquer Jericho – they say the walls were felled down by their god, after their priests circled it

blowing their ritual trumpets. I was there, so can tell you how it really was. An earthquake, not big on the Richter scale, perhaps 4 or 5, but the walls hadn't been maintained properly for a long while. And it was easy for the Israelites – this is how they started to call themselves rather than “Hebrews”, as soon as they began to annex territories here and there – to take it from there, in the panic that ensued. (If you press me, I'd agree that the timing of the earthquake could have been divinely determined, at least in theory. This would make the event a miracle by definition, by timing, but I am and always have been a skeptic, you see). So they came, they saw, they conquered. And demolished the city and its civilization. And looted: whether they used the loot or sacrificed it as burnt offering to their god (such uncivilized and commercial waste!) is immaterial. And they killed. And they saved me and my father's house, all gathered in my house that was marked by a red ribbon. And they wrote everything down for posterity, including the ideo-religious embellishments, and a very serious attempt at saving face for the spies/agents of victory.

So my life and my family's life were saved. But otherwise... The family business was lost. Everything was lost. My family dispersed: they were assimilated into the inferior culture of the conquistadors. It was easily done: similar origins, similar backgrounds, a language that was like a simplified version of ours – think about the relationship between German and Dutch, or Dutch and Afrikaans. There was the little matter of official religion, monotheism they called it. You weren't supposed to worship any of the old deities any more but only one, Yhwh. This was in fact no problem since many traits of the old religion were incorporated in “him”; besides, even the Hebrews/Israelites weren't as strict about worshipping only him for centuries to come, remonstrations by their spiritual leaders notwithstanding. Even the beloved goddesses could still be venerated, in this or the other guise.

And what happened to me? There's nothing about my eventual fate, beyond being saved, in the Israelites' first canon of holy writs. Later on, when they were already “Jewish” and their sages were compiling subsequent tomes, some of them commentaries on and updates of the original writings, they noticed my disappearance from the earlier texts and they speculated about me. They had me domesticated, of course, made me into a mother and a wife rather than the whore they initially designated me. I was made foremother of a linen-making family guild by virtue of my flax drying on the roof, in which I hid the spies. I was made into a foremother of priests



and prophets, including Jeremiah and Huldah the female prophet, who will tell her own story later in this conference. They even made me foremother of kings. They were prepared to forget and forgive my foreignness and my sexual past, my being a Broad. For them, the overriding consideration was that I acted out of faith, or so they fondly imagined. At times they even had me converted, as I mentioned earlier in my story. Baloney, as I have explained.

The Christians, to their credit, married me off to an even more prominent figure. They put me straight into the lineage of King David and, therefore, their own Messiah, in one of their first canonized testimonies. To quote:

Salmon [was] the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. (*Matthew* 1, 5-6 NRSV)

We shall have to hear Ruth about that as well. At any rate, they also made me into a model of faith in god (*Letter to the Hebrews* 11, 30-31) and a model of positive religious action (*James* 2, 25).

I'm not impressed, however, by all this good and –as the Hebrews turned Israelites turned Jews think in my case– posthumous publicity, in fact religious propaganda. First they make fun of me by nicknaming me the Broad; then they have me believe in their superiority and their god; then they forget about me, only to domesticate me once more in the service of their ideologies. The Christians are no better than the Jews in this respect. And, throughout it all, I have the feeling that they have constructed me as an anonymous woman, a nicknamed whore, in order to emphasize my faith or whatever else they attribute to me in the service of something else than just that. You see, in their culture women are considered politically inferior to men. They reason that, if even a whore could realize the result of the Israelites' infiltration into Canaan, then her menfolk should have been that acute at the very least. If a whore has faith, anybody else should. In short, they used me. And then, after I've done my bit, pressed me back into the mould all their women share, that of domesticated wifery and motherhood.

But the truth of the matter is that I did not become a wife and mother. That is a much later fiction-attempts to honor me (in their eyes) for what wasn't mine. Like other figures of fiction whose fate isn't specified in their original stories, figures who don't get to die in their own stories as they regularly should, I live forever. I am for-



ever young, forever attractive, I don't have to get married and bear children, I don't have to talk, I can continue to be near my beloved Jericho and observe. Observe it, and observe history and the way it is retold and rewritten and constructed into ever-shifting-while-remaining-the-same identities.

I was there, therefore, when my beloved city was rebuilt at a great personal cost to the contractor (there was a divine curse to prevent the reconstruction). In *Joshua* 6: 26, a curse specifies that the man who rebuilds Jericho will lose his firstborn upon laying the wall's foundations, his youngest upon completion. The realization of the curse is reported in *1 Kings* 16: 34, during King Ahab's reign. I saw this personal tragedy. I also saw how Jericho redeveloped again, slowly and over hundreds of years, from an oasis and watering place for passing trade caravans and once again into a civilized city. Herod the Great built a palace there. Men were again playing backgammon under the palms in the city's main squares; elegant ladies were carried about and chaperoned while walking, parasoles protecting their skin against the desert sun. And so on. And then decline again – I lose count of the years, and it doesn't really matter.

And of late, of course, things have been beginning to happen again in Jericho. Recently it was given to a political body that calls itself a Palestinian state-to-be, or something like this. Most of these "Palestinians" are Muslims, another religion yet. They claim to own the place and other territories conquered by the Israelis a few years back. Now, the Jews suffered greatly before they came back to the land they took over, and not always gently, from us "Canaanites": this is true. They are now back in their land, and they have a political organization called a "state". Since they trace their lineage to the Israelites/Hebrews who took the land from us, they lay claim to all of it. The Palestinians, on the other hand, also claim that it's theirs (Their roots may be shorter than the Israelites', but they are long enough). People were sitting again in the town squares, playing backgammon. Traders traveled through it and across the Jordan bridges. For a short while, I looked at my beloved city. It even acquired a casino, where Palestinians were only too happy to grab the losses of Israeli gamblers (casino gambling is not allowed in Israel). Jericho is more of a village now. But I was hoping that soon it would grow again. I wished that those squabbling descendants of the Hebrews/Israelites –if they are that– and descendants of Yishma'el –if they are that– would remember that this city has been there for thousands of years. Jericho has outlived many rulers, many govern-

ments. It has outlived the “Canaanites”, the “Israelites”, the Jews, and the Romans, among others. I was hoping that it would outlive the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians: I was hoping that it would flourish once more. And yes, for the last year or so, yes, another Palestinian *intifada*, another uprising, and Jericho is once again isolated and poor as predicted, as happened, as will happen. Woe is me, the matron saint of my beloved city: I sit here, I wait, I wish for my guilt of helping the Hebrews/Israelites to demolish it in order to save my own skin and my family, to be put to rest. Until then, until my city is finally rebuilt for posterity, I can’t rest. I can’t disappear. I can’t die. I need absolution and vindication – in my own eyes, in my own conscience. Territoriality is, regrettably, so often linked to civilization and culture, not to mention to religion. Meanwhile, I sit at the deserted gambling casino, and there’s yet another round of hostilities between Palestinians and Israelis, yet again. I look at the men rolling their prayer beads, the women in their black dresses, the young boys who throw stones and yearn to become *mujahideen*, that is, suicide martyrs who blow themselves up together with innocent Israelis. They use themselves as a military political weapon of destruction. Is it time for me to despair?

I am Rahab. The Broad. Nobody knows my real name. I live, I see things: I’m in your holy texts. As long as these texts continue to serve as such, as long as my city is not reconstituted, I’m alive if not always well. And so is my city, the ancient Jericho of the Asian-African great rift, near the Dead Sea.

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### *Afterword*

The story in *Joshua* 2 (and its epilogue in *Joshua* 6) is about the preparation to crossing boundaries. The focalization is on the spies and their source group: the Hebrews will soon come from the desert, cross the threshold to their promised land, conquer Jericho miraculously by felling its walls through priestly trumpet noise, and acquire two things: territory (Canaan to Israel) and nationhood (Hebrews to Israelites). Rahab will cross a boundary from social and ethnic and geographical foreignness, a whore and Canaanite who lives in the city wall, into rescue, acceptance by the newcomers (*Joshua* 6, 22-23) and later historiographical assimilation. However, this is incidental to the main story, a byline that upholds the newcomers’ trustworthiness.

But is this the whole story? Looking for a subtext, as one should, may deconstruct this pious picture and its message. This can be achieved by decentering the so-called spies and centering Rahab and her possible female concerns, to distinguish from the divine and community concerns exhibited by the mainline narrative. Extending her voice into fictive autobiography storytelling is justified, somewhat, by the fact that in the biblical text (*Joshua 2*) she is both the main actant and the main speaker, not the spies who are ostensibly the main figures.

And here the picture gets murky. From the declared viewpoint of the Hebrew/Israelites and their divine ideology (and probably the author's), they are entitled to the land and to its inhabitants' cooperation. From "her" viewpoint other clusters of issues emerge. Several of those may touch on gender issues, such as loyalty to a source group as against survival; a woman's social responsibility to her household and family, even though "she" lives in a patriarchal society; women's courage against authority; women's fortitude and capacity to help themselves and others even without a personal male protector; and women's wisdom and wit in emergency. Others are related to more personal and political matters, such as social status and social transition. How does one respond to transitioning military and political situations, while attempting to preserve one's identity and integrity? What are the economic and other consequences, for a source group, when threatened and conquered by a group that invades from across the border?

In the Hebrew bible "cities" are grammatically defined as feminine, and the same applies to the grammatical categorization of "cities" in many other languages. Cities and ethnic groups are often feminized in biblical prophetic metaphor, even to the point of describing them as the [unfaithful!] spouse of the biblical god. To take this a little further, Rahab represents Jericho. In fact, Rahab is Jericho and Jericho is Rahab. Jericho is the opening to the land, coming from the east. As it seems, it is a wide, broad opening: it is no real hindrance for a crossing over by the newcomers. It is conquered, the way a woman is conquered. The city walls must tumble down before it is integrated into the newly conquered territory. Rahab's physical house in the wall must be demolished before her "house", family, and her are saved and incorporated into the new target group. After being conquered, "she" can transition into acceptance and inclusion. Or can't "she"?

**Keywords:** Bibbia, Rahab, autobiografia romanzata, spie, ebrei/israeliti, Gerico, attraversamento di frontiere; Bible, Rahab, Fictional autobiography, Spies, Hebrews/Israelites, Jericho, Boundary crossing, Source and target groups.

**Biodata:** Athalya Brenner-Idan (Brenner) è professoressa emerita di *Bibbia ebraica / Antico Testamento* all'Università di Amsterdam, e attualmente anche ricercatrice presso l'University of Free State in Sudafrica. Sino al 1918 è stata professoressa di *Studi biblici* al dipartimento di Studi biblici dell'università di Tel Aviv. È stata insignita di un dottorato *honoris causa* dall'università di Bonn. Ha curato la prima e seconda serie di *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (20 voll.). Insieme a Gale A. Yee e Archie C. C. Lee, cura *Texts @ Contexts* per la serie HB/OT, sinora giunta a 8 volumi. Risiede ad Haifa e Amsterdam (A.Brenner@uva.nl).

Athalya Brenner-Idan (Brenner) is Professor Emerita of *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and currently also a researcher at the University of the Free State, South Africa. Until 2018 she was Professor in Biblical Studies at the Department of Biblical Studies at Tel Aviv University, Israel. She holds an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Bonn, Germany. She edited the first and second series of *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (20 volumes). Together with Gale A. Yee and Archie C. C. Lee, she is the Editor of the *Texts @ Contexts* for the HB/OT series, so far 8 volumes. She lives in Haifa and Amsterdam (A.Brenner@uva.nl).