

Rahab of Jericho

By D. J. WISEMAN

THE TWO HEBREW spies sent by Joshua from Shittim to gain information of the military, political and economic potential of the Jericho area¹ came to that city and entered 'the house of a harlot' (*bēt 'iššā zônā*) whose name was Rahab and stayed there temporarily.² It is evident that the ruler of Jericho had been informed of their arrival and was able to send direct to her house with a demand that they be brought out. Rahab freely admitted that the men had entered but protested affirming that they had left the city by the main gate before sundown. This explanation was accepted as if her word was customarily trusted, as indeed it was by the spies themselves.³

Rahab lived in a house on the city wall, perhaps near the main gate. She was also a recognized member of her family group,⁴ a status not normally granted to a prostitute.⁵ She is depicted as a member of an industrious household⁶ having a knowledge of affairs beyond the city and national borders.

A parallel may be found in the inn-keeper of Old Babylonian times. The inn (*bīt sābī(tī)*) was kept by a man or woman who was required to notify the palace of any stranger, especially one engaged in hostile activity, who might come to it.⁷ The laws of Eshnunna (§41) required the inn-keeper, who engaged in the conversion of commodities into local currency, to sell drink received from any foreigner,⁸ guest⁹ or temporary visitor,¹⁰ at the current

¹ Jos. 2: 1; cf. Nu. 13: 27-29.

² Jos. 2: 2-7.

³ Jos. 2: 14, 16, 22.

⁴ The Heb. 'family' consisted of the father's house (*bēt 'āb*) (as Akkad. *bīt-abi*) i.e. father's father, father and his family, father's brothers and his family (three generations). Jos. 2: 12-13, 18; 6: 23.

⁵ The woman then being associated with no 'father's house' through marriage.

⁶ Jos. 2: 6. The flax implies spinning (Pr. 31: 13; Ex. 35: 25).

⁷ Laws of Hammurabi, § 109.

⁸ *ubarum, ubrum* (J. Nougayrol, *Palais Royal d'Ugarit*, III, Paris, 1955, p. 237) the equivalent of the Heb. *hābēr* survived only as a personal name after the Old Babylonian period.

⁹ *naṭṭarum*, 'Gastfreund' (Von Soden, *Archiv Orientalni*, XVII/2, 371. B. Landsberger, *O.L.Z.*, 1923, p. 73) rather than 'one awaiting redemption' (A. Goetze, *The Laws of Eshnunna, A.A.S.O.R.*, XXXI, 1956, p. 110); cf. J. Nougayrol, *P.R.U.*, III, p. 80 (16.239, l. 15).

¹⁰ *mudum*, a visitor from outside who enjoyed privileges of hospitality for a limited period and for whom his host was responsible (A. Goetze, *op. cit.*, p. 111); perhaps used of a refugee also (*op. cit.*, p. 111, n.13).

market rate. In her rôle as a female small broker, she was prohibited, as was the merchant-banker, from receiving for trading silver, wool, barley or oil from any slave.¹¹ Such transactions in basic commodities were controlled by the palace since the ‘inn’ was at this time the town’s link with the economy of other tribes or peoples. Since, by its nature, the inn as a place for trading in liquor, could be the meeting-place for dissident elements, failure to report their presence was punishable by the death of the inn-keeper.¹² One text tells of refugees, a physician and five cooks who, on fleeing to Mari, stayed in the inn.¹³ Another, from the same city, lists seven men and one woman by name as in the service of, or owning, inns (*bītāt sābī*).¹⁴

It has been customary to translate the Akkadian *sābītu* as ‘ale-wife, inn-keeper’ by comparison with the later Aramaic *sābā* ‘bar-man’ or *sābōyā* ‘bar-maid’ yet the Babylonian *sabūm* means ‘to give drink’ rather than ‘to brew drink’.¹⁵ It is noteworthy that the occupation of the *sābītu*, and with it the role of the inn, disappeared by the Middle Babylonian period (*e.g. c.* 1100 BC).¹⁶ Although this has been attributed to technical developments which took the brewer’s craft out of the hands of women,¹⁷ it is more likely that the decline is due to changes in the economic and social structure of society. Foreign trade became increasingly the direct concern of the palace and the terms for the inn’s patrons are no longer found in the texts.¹⁸ Although the inns of this early period, as at all times and places, were often immoral places, there is no evidence that they were necessarily so.

This comparison with the Babylonian *sābītu* would raise the question of semantics. Can we find the precise meaning of the Hebrew *znh*? Josephus has Rahab not as a ‘harlot’ (*zōnā*) but as one who ‘kept an inn’ (*καταγωγίον*)¹⁹ and in this is followed by the Targum and Midrash.²⁰ While this could be attributed to the nature of his apologia or be considered ‘a distinction without a difference’²¹ it is striking that *zānā* can be defined as to ‘have

¹¹ Laws of Eshnunna, § 15.

¹² Laws of Hammurabi, § 109.

¹³ *Archives Royales de Mari*, I, 15, 28.

¹⁴ *A.R.M.*, VIII, 27, IV. 1-15 (see my review in a forthcoming *J.S.S.*)

¹⁵ W. F. Albright, *A. J. S. L.*, XXXVI, 1930-1, p. 209; G. R. Driver, *Babylonian Laws*, II, p. 197.

¹⁶ G. R. Driver, *Babylonian Laws*, II, p. 197, n.2.

¹⁷ L. F. Hartman and A. L. Oppenheim, *On Beer and Brewing Techniques in Ancient Mesopotamia*, American Oriental Society, 1950, p. 12.

¹⁸ See *e.g.* n.8.

¹⁹ *Ant.*, V. 74.

²⁰ As the equivalent of *cauponaria*.

²¹ G. R. Driver, *Babylonian Laws*, I, p. 205, n.6.

intimate or friendly dealings (not necessarily physical, but more frequently economic or spiritual) with alien persons or institutions'. Thus the *zōnā* is not one of a man's own family or kinship group, but comes from another group or non-Israelite tribe.²² It could be an activity of both men and women.²³ The female *zōnā* is distinguished from the (cult-)prostitute.²⁴ The exercise of *znh* was considered to have adverse effects on the economy²⁵ as well as on international affairs.²⁶ In a number of instances the description of a person as *zōnā* does not help in the definition of the term, e.g. the women judged by Solomon (1 Ki. 3: 16). The reference to Jephthah the descendant of Gilead 'as a son of a *zōnā*', while within our description might also indicate that it was not necessarily a shameful ascription.²⁷

The most frequent use of *zānā* is of a city, Jerusalem,²⁸ Samaria²⁹ (also Tyre³⁰) representative both of the citizens and of the territories of Judah or Israel having dealings (including trade³¹) outside those permitted by the Torah. These were with foreign nations and probably involved treaty or covenant relationships.³² Assyria and Egypt are the most often named. A further use of the term, common in Hosea and Jeremiah, is to describe the association of Israelites with the deities of an alien land (Ex. 34: 15; Dt. 31: 16), with Moloch (Lv. 20: 5), with 'satyrs' (Lv. 17: 7) or with their shrines or cults.³³

The usual etymology of *znh* is given as the Arabic *zana*.³⁴ This verb is, however, used in the Quran only to describe illicit relationships of any kind outside the clan (*ahl*).³⁵ In this sense Akkadian *zānu* is not found,³⁶ despite earlier attempts to demonstrate a root **zānu*, 'to fill' as distinct from *sēnu*, 'to load',³⁷ though

²² Lv. 21: 14; a seeming exception in Jdg. 19: 2 is to be rendered 'who hated him' (*R.S.V.*); cf. Laws of Hammurabi, § 142.

²³ Ex. 34: 16.

²⁴ Gn. 38: 21.

²⁵ Lv. 19: 29; Pr. 29: 3.

²⁶ Na. 3: 4.

²⁷ Cf. Ku-Bau, founder of the 4th Dynasty of Isin who claimed to be a *sābitu*.

²⁸ e.g. Is. 1: 21 passim.

²⁹ Ezk. 16: 16.

³⁰ Is. 23: 15.

³¹ Ezk. 16 is a good example of this.

³² As Manasseh who was a vassal of Esarhaddon of Assyria (*Iraq*, XX, 1958, p. 4).

³³ e.g. Je. 2: 20. R. Gordis, *H.U.C.A.* xxv, 1954, pp. 9-35, argues that Gomer did not violate her marriage, but symbolized the national apostasy.

³⁴ *B.D.B.*, p. 275; *The Aram. zn*'.

³⁵ E. S. W. Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, I, London, 1867, p. 1260.

³⁶ *zānu* is used only of 'to overlay, decorate (with precious metal)'. In the light of the role of the *sabūm* the Nuzi *zannu* is of interest as a dish or drink made of fomented beer (*A.F.O.*, XVIII, 1956-7, p. 339; *R.A.*, LII, 1958, p. 20).

³⁷ *Z.A.*, XVIII, 1903, p. 16.

the latter is now shown to mean ‘to load, to heap up’ (e.g. a ship, a table).³⁸ It is possible that *znh* ‘to act in a friendly way to an enemy’ (if the argument presented above is sound) may be a deliberate distinction from *znh* which is used in the sense of ‘to act in an unfriendly way to one with whom there should be close friendship, i.e. to alienate’.³⁹

It is also possible that *znh*, in some of its earliest occurrences, as in the Rahab reference, may be a biform of *zûn* ‘to provide food or sustenance’ (Akkad. *zanānu* is used in this sense, as well as to provide a city or temple with means of support).⁴⁰ This is the meaning of *māzôn* in Genesis 45: 23, which thus need no longer be considered a late Aramaism or gloss, and perhaps in the difficult Jeremiah 5: 8 (Q^cre *mēyuzzānūm*). The Hebrew *zûn* and *znn* should no longer be compared with a non-existent Akkadian *zanānu*—‘to be full (of sexual desire)’.⁴¹

All this does not imply that the traditional Christian, rather than Jewish, view that Rahab was ‘a harlot’ is necessarily wrong (cf. Jas. 2: 35; Heb. 11: 31). She is certainly an example of the Divine grace working through a sinful people. However, since much anti-Christian propaganda has been made of the unqualified description of Rahab, the ancestress of Jesus Christ (Mt. 1: 5) as ‘a harlot’,⁴² it seems well to indicate that the original need carry no more stigma than that she too was in a limited way a friend of ‘publicans and harlots’, that is of those owing allegiance to an alien power.

³⁸ See now *C.A.D.*, 16, p. 131.

³⁹ As the Akkad. *zenû*.

⁴⁰ *zanānu C.A.D.*, 21, p. 43f.; *zanānu*—‘to rain down’ is a distinct word used in the same periods.

⁴¹ *B.D.B.*, pp. 266, 276.

⁴² This is also often implied by the muslim description of Jesus as *ibn Miriam*, since a mother’s name is only given when the son is of unknown parentage, i.e. the father’s name is not known, when the mother is a harlot.