

# New American Commentary<sup>1</sup>

## Joshua 2

### Side Remark: On Rahab's Lie



A troublesome aspect of the Rahab story for many people is that she apparently uttered a bold-faced lie by telling the king of Jericho's messengers that the Israelite spies had fled when in fact they were hiding in her own house ([Josh 2:4](#)), and she was never censured for it. In fact, she and her family were spared by the Israelites ([Josh 6:25](#)) and the New Testament twice commends her in very glowing terms ([Heb 11:31](#); [Jas 2:25](#)). How could she have been accorded such a positive treatment in the face of this lie that she told?

Generations of Christian ethicists have considered Rahab's case carefully in constructing broader systems of ethics. In her case, two absolute principles of moral behavior seem to have come into conflict: (1) the principle that it is wrong to tell a lie and (2) the principle that one must protect human life. In Rahab's case, it appears that, in order to save the spies' life, she had no alternative but to lie. Or, conversely, had she told the truth and revealed the spies' position, their lives would most likely have been forfeited and Israel's inheritance of the land may have been jeopardized.

Generally, orthodox Christian ethicists argue one of three positions concerning situations in which Biblical principles of behavior seem to conflict with each other. The first position involves what many call "conflicting absolutes" or "the lesser of two evils." Christians holding this position argue that in a fallen world, sometimes two or more absolute principles of moral behavior will conflict absolutely, and that there is no recourse in the situation but to sin. In such a case, the Christian's obligation is to commit the lesser of the two sins, and then to repent of it. So, for Rahab, the lesser sin was to lie, thus sparing the spies' life, but she was wrong to lie. She also would have been wrong if she told the truth, resulting in the spies' exposure and death. Thus, she faced a situation in which it was impossible to avoid sinning. This is not God's ideal, and it may seem unfair, but it is the best humans can expect in a fallen, sinful world. This position is sometimes called "realism" by its proponents, since it attempts to deal with situations in the real (fallen) world: it admits that people might sometimes be compelled to sin, and it encourages them to cast themselves on God's mercy to forgive that sin (see [1 John 1:9](#)). Martin Luther's impatience with what he saw as an undue fastidiousness toward sin is often quoted in this regard: "If you are a preacher of grace, then preach a true grace and not a fictitious grace. ... Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world."

The second position is often labeled "hierarchicalism" or "graded absolutism." Here, many Christians argue that there is an ordered hierarchy of absolutes, such that some values have priority over others. In cases of conflict, where it is impossible to obey both commands, one should act according to the greater good (or the higher norm), and is thus "exempt" from the lower norm. Thus, in some strictly defined situations, certain actions usually labeled as sins are not in fact sins, that is, their usual nature as sins is set aside, redefined. In Rahab's case, the greater good was to save the spies' life rather than to tell the truth, and thus she did not sin in telling the lie, because she was exempted from it by the higher norm of saving lives. Biblical support for this is adduced from cases where it appears that God sanctioned

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<sup>1</sup> David M. Howard, *New American Commentary – Volume 5: Joshua*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 106-111.

breaking of some laws in favor of following others, such as (1) the Hebrew midwives' lying to the pharaoh in order to save the Israelite boys ([Exod 1:15–21](#)); (2) Jesus' injunction that people should hate their fathers, mothers, wives, children, brothers, and sisters and follow him instead ([Luke 14:26](#)); or (3) Jesus' statement that there were some matters of the law—such as tithing of certain spices—that were less important than others—such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness ([Matt 23:23–24](#)).

The third position speaks of “nonconflicting absolutes,” whereby, in any given situation, seemingly opposed absolute norms do not conflict in reality. In this view, God does not set aside or exempt certain absolutes in certain situations, but he holds to them absolutely. In situations where these may seem to conflict, there will always be some “third way” that avoids sin. Biblical support for this comes from Paul's strong rejection of the “ends-justifies-the-means” argument of those who would say, “Let us do evil that good may result” ([Rom 3:7–8](#)), as well as his assurance that, when Christians are tempted to sin, “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” ([1 Cor 10:13](#)). In Rahab's case, then, she should not have lied, but she should have trusted God to provide for her a way to protect the spies that did not necessitate sinning.

Each of these positions takes the Bible seriously and attempts to do justice to Biblical principles, yet each has aspects that appear to be unsatisfactory, as well, at least on the surface. Concerning the first position, it is difficult to conceive of God's holding people responsible for sinning when their only choice is to do just that. Furthermore, if Jesus was in all ways tempted as we are, and yet remained sinless ([Heb 4:15](#)), then certainly he would not have committed a lesser sin in order to avoid a greater one.

For this reason, many Christians adopt the second position, in which God “exempts” people from certain sins in certain situations. This is attractive because it does indeed appear that some biblical values are more important than others or that some sins are lesser than others ([Matt 23:23](#)). However, whether sins are greater or lesser, they are still sins. As Lutzer points out, “Nowhere is there any indication in the Scriptures that sin has not been committed when a moral law was violated because someone was acting with a higher norm in view.” Furthermore, nowhere does the Bible lay out an ordered hierarchy of values or exemptions, and so human judgments necessarily play a part in establishing these, introducing an element of human subjectivity at a critical point in making ethical decisions. Although this position is different in many important ways from the relativistic, situation ethics of J. Fletcher, for whom the only guiding ethical norm is the law of love, they also are similar in several ways.

The third position is often criticized as naïve, since in Rahab's case, it appears she had no choice: lie or the spies would die. For us—operating with the cool light of hindsight and in the non-threatening comfort of our homes, offices, classrooms, or churches—to condemn Rahab for lying in the heat of a very real, stressful, and life-threatening situation is to condemn her unjustly. Many claim that it is a naïve legalism that would require her to find another way out in such a situation.

Despite some apparent problems, the position here is that “nonconflicting absolutism” would best seem to fit the scriptural data, entailing the fewest difficulties. The ends do not justify the means ([Rom 3:7–8](#)), as some hierarchicalists seem to argue. To act otherwise shows a lack of faith in God's ability to

protect or provide, even in desperate situations. To act otherwise also fails to recognize that some moral norms are indeed absolutes, for which the Bible gives no exceptions (e.g., the prohibition against lying), while others are provided with exceptions (e.g., the command not to kill has the exception in cases of capital punishment, e.g., in [Exod 21:12–17](#) or [Gen 9:6](#)). The crucial difference from hierarchicalism is that the exceptions stem from God himself, not human judgments or extrapolations.

In Rahab's case, then, she should not have told the lie, since the Bible is very clear about lying. It roots truth-telling in God's very nature, because he is truth (e.g., [John 14:6](#); [1 John 5:20](#)) and he cannot lie ([Titus 1:2](#); [Heb 6:18](#)). Truth comes from God ([Ps 43:3](#)), and his word is truth ([John 17:17](#)). As we are to be holy because God is holy, so we are to be truthful because he is truthful. Lying is uniformly condemned in both Old and New Testaments (e.g., [Lev 19:11](#); [Prov 12:22](#); [Eph 4:25](#)).

The best examples used by hierarchicalists to argue that lying is sometimes justified are the cases of Rahab and the Hebrew midwives in Egypt. In the latter instance, the midwives did not obey the pharaoh, who had ordered them to kill Hebrew male infants, and they lied to him about it ([Exod 1:17–19](#)). Many Christians point out that the text commends the midwives, by stating that God was kind to them and gave them families of their own ([Exod 1:20–21](#)). However, a careful reading of the text shows that the author's central concern was the midwives' reverence for God (their “fear” of him: [1:17](#), [21](#)), and the only causative construction here is in connection with this reverence: “And because (*kî*) the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own” ([1:21](#)). God was kind to them (v. [20](#)) and gave to them abundantly (v. [21](#)) because they feared him rather than the pharaoh (vv. [17](#), [21](#)), not because they lied.

In Rahab's case, since the New Testament commends her so highly, many Christians argue that this justifies lying in some instances. [Hebrews 11:31](#) states that “By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.” [James 2:25](#) says that “Was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?” However, here again, a careful reading shows that nowhere is Rahab's lie per se commended. Her faith is rightfully commended, and her actions in helping the spies are, as well. The James passage seems especially explicit. It mentions two actions: (1) giving lodging to the spies and (2) sending them out by a safer route. It does not mention Rahab's lying, or even her “protection” of the men accomplished by the lie. James very well might have omitted mentioning the deception deliberately, to avoid the appearance of condoning it, since the passage is fairly explicit otherwise.

Many have objected that such analyses of the two episodes are wrongheaded and overly legalistic, since the midwives' and Rahab's lies were part and parcel of the deliverance that they were able to effect. However, this ignores the points noted earlier about truth's being rooted in God's very own nature, and Paul's arguments that the ends do not justify the means ([Rom 3:7–8](#)) and that God promises deliverance from the necessity of sinning ([1 Cor 10:13](#)). Also, if Christ was in all ways tempted as we are and yet remained sinless ([Heb 4:15](#)), as we noted above, then surely he faced difficult situations and emerged sinless. There is no record that he broke (or “transcended”) lower norms in favor of higher ones—how much less so that he ever committed the lesser of two sins!—except perhaps in matters involving the ceremonial laws (such as supposed sabbath breaking, e.g., in [Mark 2:23–27](#)). Here again, however, the exceptions come from God himself, not human judgments or extrapolations.

How could Rahab have avoided lying and still protected the spies? We do not know exactly; we may only speculate. Kaiser, for example, suggests that “Rahab should have hidden the spies well and then refused to answer the question whether she was hiding them. She could, for instance, have volunteered, ‘Come in and have a look around,’ while simultaneously praying that God would have made the searchers especially obtuse.” Even in the tragic, hypothetical case in which, had Rahab not lied, and the spies had been found out, we can note that even protection of human life is not the highest good. If that were the case, there would never have been any Christian martyrs or there would never be any need to lay down one’s life for someone else. To lie and deny the faith would be justified as reasonable under the circumstances, and yet the Bible and Christian history are replete with examples where people chose death over betraying God or others.

One further factor must be considered here. Christian ethicists of almost all varieties agree that sometimes people have forfeited their right to know the truth, and that it is legitimate at times to conceal the truth, even if it is not permissible to lie outright. Many argue that warfare constitutes a special case in which lying is permissible, in which opposing combatants do not have a right to know the full truth. Thus, Rahab, since the Canaanites ostensibly were at war with Israel, did not sin by lying to the Canaanites. The gap between hierarchicalists and non-conflicting absolutists in such a case appears to narrow considerably, since the latter acknowledge—by appealing to the special conditions of warfare and certain people’s right to know the truth or not—what the former hold on a different basis, namely, that higher norms come into play here.

However, even if one grants the assumption that warfare requires different norms—an assumption not clearly taught in the Scriptures in any case—it is not clear that warfare for the Israelites in Joshua’s day required the same suspension of norms. God himself was to be Israel’s warrior, and even Rahab the Canaanite knew this. She acknowledged the facts that had the entire land of Canaan melting with terror: that Israel’s God had given it the land, and that he had gone before it in parting the waters of the Red Sea and in defeating Sihon and Og ([Josh 2:9–11](#)). Over and over again in Joshua (and Judges: see especially the story of Gideon), God acted as Israel’s warrior. Israel needed scarcely to fight, as God routed its enemies. This is something that Rahab would have known, given her intimate knowledge of Israel, its God, and its history to that point (see below, on vv. [9–11](#)), and thus her lie betrayed a lack of trust in this God, to whom we see her committing her life (commendably so!). Her sin was not only the lie per se, but also a lack of trust in God. The elders of Israel who asked Samuel for a king “to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles” ([1 Sam 8:20](#)) also sinned in this way. They (and she) did not trust God to provide for and protect them. They attempted to solve the problem by looking to a military-style king, and she did so by lying.

Thus, in evaluating Rahab, we must render a mixed verdict, one that condemns her lie and momentary lack of trust in God, but one that commends her faith, both in deed and in word. As Calvin stated, “those who hold what is called a dutiful lie to be altogether excusable, do not sufficiently consider how precious truth is in the sight of God. Therefore, although our purpose be to assist our brethren, to consult for their safety and relieve them, it never can be lawful to lie, because that cannot be right which is contrary to the nature of God. And God is truth. And still the act of Rahab is not devoid of the praise of virtue, although it is not spotlessly pure. For it often happens that while the saints study to hold the right path, they deviate into circuitous courses.” It was to Rahab’s credit, however—and to God’s—that her clear and enduring faith in Israel’s God prevailed in the end over her momentary lapse into a lie. God judged her ultimately by her enduring faith, not by her lie ([Heb 11:31](#); [Jas 2:25](#)).