Joshua 2 tells the story of two Israelite spies sent to reconnoiter the city of Jericho. They find lodging in the house of a prostitute named Rahab, who hides them on her roof and then lies on their behalf, telling the king’s men that they have already left the city. Rahab is rewarded for her assistance of the spies by being exempted, along with her family, from the ban that is placed on the rest of the city and it is reported that “she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day” (Josh 6:25). Rahab’s lie is never condemned in Scripture and she is later applauded as a woman of faith (Heb 11:31) and good words (James 2:25) who is featured prominently as an ancestor of Christ (Matt 1:5). All of this leads to the ethical question, is it ever permissible to lie? Was Rahab justified in the lie that she told? Was it the right thing for her to do? Or was Rahab’s lie a sin? Was there an ethically better course of action that Rahab could have, and perhaps should have, taken?

Survey of Views

Three main categories of answers have been given to this question. First, there are those who argue that it was right for Rahab to lie in this circumstance and she should have done so. Second, there are those who argue that it was wrong for Rahab to lie in this circumstance but she should have done so anyway. Third, there are those who argue that it was wrong for Rahab to lie in this circumstance and she should not have done so.

The first position, that it was right for Rahab to lie and that she should have done so, is often referred to as “graded absolutism” and has been argued with some variety by a number of different sources. For instance, Charles Hodge argues that in order for a statement to count as a lie, three characteristics must be true. First, the statement must be contrary to fact, that is, it must state something as true, which in fact, is not true. But not all false statements are lies. Literary works of fiction, such as fables and parables, are not true, yet they are not lies. And so, secondly, there must not only be a statement which is false, but there must also be intent to deceive. But even this does not, in itself, classify a statement as a lie. Hodge notes that “strategems in war are allowable.” So, thirdly, Hodge argues that for something to count as a lie, “there must be not only the enunciation or signification of what is false, and an intention to deceive, but also a violation of some obligation.”

Hodge argues further “that every man is expected to speak the truth, and is under a tacit but binding promise not to deceive his neighbours by word or act. If in any case he is guilty of intentional deception, he must be able to show that in that particular case the obligation does not exist.” Hence, it could be argued that the case of Rahab occurs within the context of war and though the king of Jericho did not know it, she had changed sides and did not owe him the truth. Thus, Robertson McQuilken concludes that “Rahab acted in faith that the God who was with Israel was mightier than the gods of Jericho, and she did the right thing—she sided with God’s people and deceived through actions and words in what may properly be called an act of war.” According to McQuilken, Rahab’s deception began, not when she lied to the king’s messengers, but when she hid the spies on the roof. So, if it was right to hide the spies, it was also right to make a false statement about their whereabouts. And if it was wrong to deceive with words, it was also wrong to deceive with actions.

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3 Hodge, 3:441.
4 Hodge, 3:444.
6 McQuilken, 440.
Norm Geisler takes a slightly different path to a similar conclusion. He does not accept Hodge’s contention that an intentional deception only counts as a lie in a situation where there is an obligation to tell the truth.\(^7\) Instead, Geisler insists that an intentional falsehood is always a lie and a lie is always wrong.\(^8\) But sometimes two or more moral absolutes will come into an unavoidable conflict. In such situations, an individual is morally responsible to follow the higher moral law and is morally exempt from the lower law. In the case of Rahab, she had an obligation to tell the truth and also an obligation to save the lives of the Israelite spies. Since the obligation to save a life was the higher moral requirement, Rahab is not culpable for the lie in this case. Geisler concludes,

Rahab intentionally deceived to save the lives of Israel’s spies and was immortalized in the spiritual ‘hall of fame’ (Heb. 11). It should be noted that first, nowhere does the Bible condemn her for this deception; second, her falsehood was an integral part of the act of mercy she showed in saving the spies’ lives; and third, the Bible says, ‘Rahab ... shall be spared, because she hid the spies we sent’ (Josh. 6:17). But the real concealment was accomplished by deceiving the authorities at her door. It seems that God blessed her because of not in spite of it. Hence, her ‘lie’ was an integral part of her faith for which she was commended of God (Heb 11:31; James 2:25).\(^9\)

The second position, that is was wrong for Rahab to lie, but she still should have done it, is known as “conflicting absolutism.” In essence, this view holds that in a fallen world, sometimes the best choice available is still a sinful choice. In such cases, rather than seeking to obey the higher moral law, one should seek to do the lesser of two evils. It would have been wrong for Rahab to deliver the spies over to the king of Jericho. It was also wrong for her to lie. Adolph Harstad argues that when Rahab converted to the God of Israel, she was instantaneously justified, but that sanctification is an ongoing process and she is not yet a mature believer. She commended for sheltering the spies, but neither the book of Joshua or the New Testament endorses every detail about Rahab. Her deception is not condemned, but neither is it defended. According to Harstad, even Rahab’s good works were not without sin. He concludes that, “She does what she thinks is best under the circumstances. Some

\(^{7}\) Geisler, 96.  
\(^{8}\) Geisler, 127.  
\(^{9}\) Geisler, 122.
questions easily answered theoretically in the setting of a church or seminary after a long discussion are not always as easy to answer quickly under pressure in the sinful world." So Rahab was wrong to lie, but forgiven.

The third position, that it was wrong for Rahab to lie and she should not have done so, is known as “unqualified absolutism.” This view holds that there are no irresolvable conflicts in moral absolutes. There will always be some alternative that avoids sin. Appeal is often made to 1 Cor 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.” John Murray argues that truth must be defined in reference to the character of God. “He is the God of truth and all truth derives its sanctity from him. This is why all untruth or falsehood is wrong; it is a contradiction of that which God is.” Hence, any deviation from the truth, intentional or otherwise, is in some sense a result of sin. Murray states, “There would be no misunderstanding and no misrepresentation if there were no sin.” He argues that a person may not under any circumstances speak what is known to be untrue or what is believed to be false. A person may conceal the truth from those who have no right to know it. There is no obligation to divulge everything that one knows. Murray avows that, “There is a chasm of difference between the forfeiture of right to know the truth, which belongs to one man, and the right to speak untruth on the part of another.” Thus, in the case of Rahab, she had every right to conceal the spies and had no obligation to reveal their whereabouts, but she was wrong to speak what was patently false, even to the messengers of the kind of Jericho. As Walter Kaiser puts it, the issue is “whether God recognizes and approves of

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10 Adoloph Harstad, Joshua (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2004), 116-117.
12 Murray, 132.
13 Murray, 135.
14 Murray, 147.
otherwise dubious methods that are alien to the integrity of his character in fulfilling the purpose of his will." The unqualified absolutist answers no.

**Hermeneutical Considerations**

A proper analysis of the significance of Joshua 2 for biblical ethics depends on an awareness of the characteristics of biblical narrative. The primary purpose of biblical narrative is not to teach moral lessons but to reveal how God is at work in history to accomplish his purposes. Narratives include details that are merely descriptive, telling what happened without making a value judgment upon it, along with those that are prescriptive, telling what should or should not happen. According to Fee and Stuart, narratives “often illustrate what is taught explicitly and categorically elsewhere.” Similarly, David Howard states that, “implicit teachings in narratives must be measured against explicit teachings in expository sections of Scripture.” Narratives must be read as wholes, with attention to plot development and characterization. Individual episodes must be understood in relationship to the message of the entire discourse.

**Exposition of Joshua 2**

The overall purpose of the book of Joshua is adequately summarized in Joshua 21:43-45.

So the LORD gave Israel all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and lived in it. And the LORD gave them rest on every side, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers, and no one of all their enemies stood before them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hand. Not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass.

God is keeping his covenant promises to the people of Israel by giving them the land of Canaan. The first twelve chapters of the book, in particular, are concerned with the conquest of the land, and are summarized in Joshua 11:23, “So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken

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17 Fee and Stuart, 92.  
to Moses, and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. Thus the land had rest from war.”\(^{19}\) John Stek, in his analysis of the Rahab narrative, further subdivides the argument of the book as follows:

- King Yahweh’s entrance into the land with his army (1:1-5:12)
- King Yahweh’s conquest of the land (5:13-12:24)
- King Yahweh’s administrative organization of his conquered land (13:1-21:45)
- King Yahweh’s concern for Israel’s future loyalty (22:1-24:43)\(^{20}\)

The focal point of the Rahab narrative and primary reason for its inclusion in the book is Rahab’s confession in Joshua 2:9-14. According to Merling, Rahab “speaks on behalf of the Canaanites” and occupies a place of importance second only to Joshua in the argument of the book.\(^{21}\) Her words perform several important functions.

In the first place, Rahab’s words correspond to what God has promised and provide evidence that God’s promises were being fulfilled. Merling recognizes the following parallels:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rahab’s Confession</th>
<th>God’s Promise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Josh 2:9a, “I know God has given you this land”</td>
<td>Josh 1:2, “Arise, cross this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh 2:9b, “The terror of you has fallen on us”</td>
<td>Exod 23:27, “I will send my terror ahead of you, and throw into confusion all the people”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh 2:9c, “All the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you”</td>
<td>Exod 15:15c, “All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh 2:10, “For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt”</td>
<td>Exod 14:29,31, “But the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. And when Israel saw the great power which the Lord had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh 2:10, “And what you did to the two kings of Israel”</td>
<td>Deut 31:4, “And the Lord will do to them just as He did to Pharaoh and all his army”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og whom you utterly destroyed”
did to Sihon and Og the kings of the Amorites, and to their land when He destroyed them”

| Josh 2:11, “And when we heard it, our hearts melted” | Deut 1:28, “Our brethren have made our hearts melt, saying, ‘The people are bigger and taller than we; the cities are large and fortified to heaven’” |
| Josh 2:11, “the Lord is God in heaven above and earth beneath” | Deut 4:39, “The Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below” |

This last phrase, “in heaven above and earth below,” is particularly significant because is found only three times prior to this, “all in contexts that affirm God’s exclusive claims to sovereignty.” Rahab appears to be acknowledging God as the only true God in contrast to the Canaanite deities. She also seems to be well versed in the Pentateuch. Apparently, Israel’s reputation and the reputation of Israel’s God had preceded them, and in a form that mirrors closely the actual wording of Scripture.

Thematically, the most important point in the chapter is that God has given the whole land into the hands of Israel and the Canaanites know this, as revealed by Rahab in her report to the spies.

But secondly, Rahab’s confession of faith provides a “powerful narrative foil for Achan the Judahite, who, because of his failure to take Yahweh's kingship seriously, lost any part in Yahweh's and Israel's future in the land.”

Duvall and Hays note the following contrasts between Rahab and Achan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rahab</th>
<th>Achan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canaanite</td>
<td>Hebrew (tribe of Judah, the best)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitute (disrespectable)</td>
<td>Respectable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should have died, but survived and prospered</td>
<td>Should have prospered, but died</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her family and all she owned survived</td>
<td>His family and all he owned perished</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation perishes</td>
<td>Nation prospers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Hides the spies</em> from the king</td>
<td><em>Hides the loot</em> from God and Joshua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hides the spies <em>on the roof</em></td>
<td>Hides the loot <em>under his tent</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fears the God of Israel</td>
<td>Does not fear the God of Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has only <em>heard</em> of God, yet believes</td>
<td>Has <em>seen</em> the acts of God, but disobeys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Her house survives while the city is burned</td>
<td>His tent is burned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle, sheep, and donkeys of Jericho perish</td>
<td>Cattle, sheep, and donkeys of Achan perish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She becomes like an Israelite and lives</td>
<td>He becomes like a Canaanite and dies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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22 Merling, 37-40.
26 Stek, 31.
Duvall and Hays conclude, “the first two people we meet in the story are exceptions to the rule! The Canaanite Rahab lives and the Israelite Achan dies. The narrator is letting us know that there is more to the conquest than just the destruction of the Canaanites. There are critical issues of individual faith and obedience involved.”

Thirdly, “The story of Rahab confirms God’s welcome to all people, whatever their condition.” Rahab and her family are an exception to the ban pronounced on all the peoples of the land in Deut 7:1-5; 20:16-18. As such, they stand in stark contrast to the Gibeonites of chapter 9, who come deceptively to make a treaty with Israel and preserve their own identity without truly submitting to the God of Israel. They become a thorn in Israel’s side, an example of the unfinished work of annihilating the people of the land and source of perpetual problems in the time of the judges and throughout the monarchy. Rahab is different than that. She, in effect, becomes an Israelite. She adopts the God of Israel as her God and is incorporated fully into the people of Israel.

Rahab’s deception and lie in Joshua 2:1-8 need to be read in light of her confession in vv 9-14. In vv 1-8, Rahab is introduced as a most unlikely candidate to exhibit faith in the God of Israel. She is a Canaanite and a prostitute. Efforts to soften Rahab’s identification as a prostitute are uncalled for, as are efforts to overplay this and suggest an improper relationship between her and the spies. The text gives nothing to support this. The point is that as a prostitute, she is someone only marginally accepted even in Canaanite society. And on top of that, she is a liar. No value judgment is placed on this fact. It is simply reported. Hess provides a helpful summary,

It is best not to excuse Rahab’s actions, but neither to be troubled by them. In so far as they were wrong, the narrator and Israelite readers would understand that her acceptance among the people of Israel would provide the means for forgiveness of such sin. The ethical issue is not

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28 Duvall and Hays, 310.
the concern of the narrative. It stresses the deception, not in order to condemn Rahab but to magnify her personal risk in hiding the spies.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{Antecedent Theology}

Since the text of Joshua places no explicit value judgment on Rahab’s lie, that value judgment must ultimately be derived from the antecedent theology of truth and falsehood that was available to the readers at that time. The closest parallel to Rahab in the Pentateuch is the account of the Hebrew midwives in Exod 1:15-22. Pharaoh tells the midwives that they are to kill all the baby boys among the Hebrews, but they don’t. When questioned about this, they lie, saying that Hebrew women give birth before the midwives can arrive to attend to them, which probably does more to protect the midwives themselves than it does to protect the Hebrew children, since Pharaoh institutes other measures to eliminate the babies. Here again, the lie is apparently rewarded since the text says that “God was good to the midwives” and “He established households for them” (Exod 1:20-21). But the only thing which the text explicitly says God rewards is that “the midwives feared God.”

Michael Williams analyzes fifteen cases of deception in the book of Genesis and concludes that three of them are evaluated positively by the text. He concludes from this that deception is acceptable when used to restore \textit{shalom} or normal relations that have been disturbed.\textsuperscript{33} Williams’ positive evaluation of Tamar’s lie in Genesis is questionable, and the two deceptions that Joseph plays upon his brothers are presented without an explicit value judgment as well. Williams would extend his findings to both the case of the midwives and the case of Rahab in that their “deceptive behavior serves to protect, preserve, or restore shalom in the covenant community,”\textsuperscript{34} but the case remains that all of these are narrative contexts which offer no explicit value judgment.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Hess, 86.
\item Williams, 18.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
As far as explicit statements in the Pentateuch are concerned, the ninth commandment, “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20) is arguably restricted in scope to judicial contexts. But Lev 19:11, “You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another” is more broadly drawn. Also, Num 23:19, “God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” gives justification for grounding the idea of truthfulness in the character of God.

**Conclusion**

There is some merit in each of the three ethical systems that have been surveyed here. The conflicting absolute position rightly judges that spiritual maturity is a process and that making a decision in the midst of a difficult situation is not as easy as making the same decision in the calm of the study. All believers should be thankful for the grace of God which covers the inevitable ethical lapses which occur in these situations. But that does not mean that better choices are not available or that they should not be sought. In fact, this should be an encouragement to spend time in the study during the calm in preparation for the storms that will inevitably come.

The graded absolute position rightly judges that ethical decisions can be complex. God’s moral absolutes may not always be reducible to one-liners such as “never say anything that is false” or “never intentionally deceive anyone.” And yet, it does not seem appropriate that seeming conflicts in scriptural demands should be resolved through extra-biblical warrant. The nuances and qualifications of God’s moral standards should be sought in Scripture and if they can be exhaustively defined by Scripture, this results in an absolutism that is not qualified, but unqualified. This is an issue of the sufficiency of Scripture.

The unqualified absolute position remains the most viable alternative. It is grounded in the unchanging character of God and in the absolute nature of His moral standards. It’s primary weakness is the difficulty of exhaustively defining the nuances of God’s moral standards and applying these in real
life situations. In other words, it is a great theory, but the details must be worked out in individual passages of Scripture and individual situations in life.
Bibliography


