

Was Rahab Really an Innkeeper?

A Response to a Comment in an Article by Gwen Shamblin.

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Every once in a while I read something that makes me scratch my head and ask, "Hmmm ... What could have made the author write such a thing?" This was my reaction to an off-hand remark Gwen Shamblin recently made in an article titled "Submit Yourselves for the Lord's Sake" in the May-June edition of her Weigh Down Workshop's *Exodus* magazine.²

Actually, I was already scratching my head at the very beginning of the article, but not because I wondered about the author's motivation for writing. I was scratching my head because I couldn't believe that yet another person was misinterpreting the story of the centurion's servant in Matt. 8:5-13 (and Luke 7:1-10) as being a story about the supposed need to submit to a "line of authority," rather than its obvious purpose, which was to demonstrate Who Jesus is (He has such great authority over all creation that He's able to heal long-distance) and the kind of faith that He's looking for (a faith that doesn't have to see in order to believe). The centurion went home content in the knowledge that Jesus had spoken, that His word would be done, and His servant would be healed.

It was this kind of faith that caused Jesus to marvel: not a faith based on the centurion's grasp of hierarchical "chains of command" (which Jesus prohibited from His church in Luke 22:24-26), but a faith based on confidence in Christ Himself. However, in a page taken directly out of Bill Gothard's "Basic Seminar," Gwen Shamblin twists the story into something that has nothing to do with either Matthew's or Luke's accounts. And then she confirms her dependence on Gothard by citing other favorite Scriptures of his (especially 1 Sam. 15:23).

As If That Wasn't Enough ...

As I read through all this depressing misuse of Scripture, I thought it was going to be just another attempt to smuggle authoritarianism into the church. Of course, it was all that, but much to my surprise, it was more.

For some reason, in the middle of quoting James 2:17-26, Shamblin inserted a parenthetical comment in the middle of verse 25, so that her citation of that verse reads as follows:

"... In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute ..." (The translated word "prostitute" could be translated "innkeeper." And that makes more sense, since she had her family with her. Boy, has she been slammed over the centuries!) "... considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ..."

This article came to my attention as the result of this one parenthetical comment. A friend of mine emailed me and asked, "Could you tell me if the word for 'prostitute' as applied to Rahab could be translated as 'innkeeper' as Gwen states?" So I followed the URL link to the article, and read the remark in context.

To cut straight to the chase, the simple answer is, "No, the word for 'prostitute' in James 2:25 *cannot* be translated 'innkeeper.'"

The word in question is *pornē* (πόρνη) which occurs 12 times in the New Testament (NT),

(Matt 21:31, 32; Luke 15:30; 1 Cor. 6:15, 16; Heb. 11:31; Jas. 2:25; Rev. 17:1, 5, 15, 16; and 19:2), and is *always* translated as "harlot" or "prostitute." It *cannot* by any stretch of the imagination be translated "innkeeper." It is part of a frequently-used group of words that includes the verb form of *pornē*, *porneuō* (πορνεύω), which occurs 8 times in the NT (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:18; Rev. 2:14) and is translated as either "commit fornication" or "act immorally," *pornos* (πόρνος), which occurs 10 times (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:9), and is translated as either "fornicator," "whoremonger," or "immoral person," and *porneia* (πορνεία), which occurs 25 times (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:1), and is translated as either "fornication" or "immorality."

Pointing Out the Obvious ...

It's more than obvious to any English speaker that this ancient Greek word-group is the etymological source of our words "pornography" and "fornication." We don't have any modern words derived from *pornē* that's in any way related to the idea of an innkeeper, the Greek word for which (*pandocheus*; πανδοχεύς), occurs only once in the NT (Luke 10:35), in the parable of the Good Samaritan. (In the KJV it's translated "host.") But about the only thing that either of these two words have in common is that they both begin with the Greek letter pi.³ The word for "prostitute" (*pornē*) is a very common word in the NT, part of a frequently-used word group, of which we have many instances in the NT to substantiate its meaning. The word for "innkeeper" occurs only once, and isn't even related to the word-group to which the word for "prostitute" belongs.⁴ The point here is that their meanings are not interchangeable, nor do they overlap in any way.

Reinventing Greek and Hebrew

A proper understanding of the biblical languages is essential for the correct translation and interpretation of Scripture. So when people who are obviously untrained in biblical Hebrew and Greek start making pronouncements on how the original languages should be translated, I get nervous. Why would Gwen Shamblin believe that she knows better than the translators how the word *pornē* should be translated in James 2:25? She provides the first of two clues when she writes: "And that makes more sense, since she had her family with her."

But how does the fact that Rahab had her relatives with her when she escaped (Josh. 6:23-25) make it more likely that she was an innkeeper than a prostitute? (The text mentions Rahab's parents, brothers, and other relatives, but doesn't mention any children of Rahab, although prostitutes were known to keep their children; see 1 Kings 3:16-27.) Is Shamblin implying that if Rahab was a prostitute, her family would not want to escape the destruction of Jericho with her? Or that if Rahab was a prostitute she wouldn't have cared about the fate of her relatives at the hands of an invading army? This doesn't seem to make "more sense."

It's difficult to discern exactly what Shamblin was thinking when she wrote these words, but the words themselves betray both a lack of understanding of both ancient pagan culture and the specifics of Rahab's story.

And then Shamblin observes, "Boy, has she been slammed over the centuries!" Again, it's difficult to determine what Shamblin means by this remark, but she seems to be implying that the simple fact that she's been referred to as a "prostitute" has damaged her reputation. This is quite an odd opinion to hold, however, since all the biblical authors who call her a prostitute (Joshua, the author of Hebrews, and James) obviously hold her in high regard.

When Matthew recorded the genealogy of Christ at the beginning of his gospel, he normally omitted the names of the mothers. But he went out of his way to mention three women in Christ's lineage: Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba (Matt. 1:5-6). A former prostitute, a Moabite, and an adulteress! Under the Law of Moses, adulteresses were to be stoned (Lev. 20:10), and prostitutes and Moabites were to be excluded from the assembly of Israel (Deut 23:3, 17). And yet Rahab was the mother of Boaz, who married Ruth, an ancestor of David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba! So Jesus was part Moabite, and had a prostitute, an adulterer *and* adulteress among his physical ancestors. Does the fact that the Bible records these facts mean that it "slammed" all

these people?

Perhaps the real issue is that Gwen Shamblin doesn't understand God's grace, and because of her misunderstanding thinks she needs to redefine biblical words like *pornē* to make biblical characters more righteous than they actually were.

But the Prodigal Son did not squander his inheritance on *innkeepers* (the plural of *pornē* in Luke 15:30). He squandered it on *prostitutes*. Jesus did not tell the chief priests and elders that "the tax-collectors and *innkeepers* go into the kingdom of God before you" (same Greek word, Matt. 21:31), but rather "the tax-collectors and *prostitutes*." To say, as Shamblin does, that the word for "prostitute" could be translated "innkeeper" invites all kinds of absurd translations in the NT, effectively turning our understanding of many Scriptures upside-down. Could she really be serious about this?

Interpretation by Footnote

To find the roots of Shamblin's mistranslation, we actually have to go back to the writings of Flavius Josephus (AD 37-100). She's basically passing on a very ironically humorous misinterpretation of Josephus's re-telling of the story of Rahab.

Shamblin never gets around to explaining why James supposedly called Rahab an "innkeeper" when the book of Joshua clearly calls her a "prostitute" (Josh. 2:1; 6:17, 25; Hebrew: *zanah* (זָנָה), which has no relation to any Hebrew word for "innkeeper", but like *pornē* also comes from a Hebrew word group referring to fornication or prostitution). And here is where we find the link to Josephus, for in his *Antiquities of the Jews*⁵ he indicates that the Hebrew spies of Joshua 2 stayed "in the inn kept by Rahab."

Some believe that Josephus may have deliberately avoided referring to Rahab as a prostitute in order to clear the spies who stayed with her of any charge of immorality. But this doesn't seem likely, since (A) the language of Joshua is sufficient to avoid any such innuendo, (B) it was no secret in Josephus' time that the book of Joshua (in both the original Hebrew and the Septuagint Greek translation) called her a "prostitute," and (C) the fact remains that, as one commentator wrote, "'Innkeeper' and 'prostitute,' however, were synonymous terms in that culture."⁶ One scholar has also written concerning the type of "inn" Rahab kept, that, "Such a place would naturally draw the vices of the region, as has been the case throughout history."⁷ The marginal note in Whiston's translation of Josephus indicates that prostitution was so common among female innkeepers that it became the custom to automatically refer to them as prostitutes.⁸

So in the ancient Middle East, the word for "innkeeper" actually was in practical terms interchangeable with the word "prostitute!" Some favor Gwen Shamblin is doing Rahab! Meanwhile, all attempts to re-define the Hebrew word *zanah* as referring to something other than a prostitute have failed due to lack of evidence.⁹ The Septuagint translations of Josh. 2:1, 6:17 and 25 do not hesitate to call Rahab a prostitute by translating the Hebrew word *zanah* with the Greek word *pornē*.

Even so, for whatever reason the New International Version translators attached a marginal note to the word "prostitute" in Josh. 2:1 that reads, "Or possibly an *innkeeper*." This is unfortunate, because even if this was true (which many Hebrew scholars doubt), it requires knowledge of the historical background to truly understand its significance: namely, that "innkeeper" was practically synonymous with "prostitute."

Perhaps Shamblin was using an NIV when she wrote her comment on James 2:25. If so, then she compounded her error by giving the false impression that what she was saying ("The translated word 'prostitute' could be translated 'innkeeper.'") was true of the word *pornē* in James 2:25. It's not.

Not only can *pornē* not be translated "innkeeper," but the fact that both James and the author of Hebrews (along with the Septuagint translators about two centuries earlier) used *pornē* to translate *zanah* in the book of Joshua is decisive evidence that *zanah* shouldn't be translated as "innkeeper" either.

Verbal Obfuscation: The World's Second-Oldest Profession

In the final analysis we are left with a Hebrew word (*zanah*) that always refers to "illicit sexual intercourse," especially prostitution,¹⁰ and a Greek word (*pornē*) that always means "prostitute."¹¹ And both are applied to Rahab. Rahab is only referred to as an "innkeeper" in extra-biblical literature, and even then it could very well have been as a euphemism for what most female innkeepers actually were in ancient times: prostitutes. So by claiming that the word "prostitute" could be translated as "innkeeper," Shamblin is simply trading words that meant the same thing in their historical contexts.

ENDNOTES

1. This article was written on September 22, 2000. I may be contacted by email at ronhenzel@mediaone.net.
2. At the time of this writing, a copy of this article was available on the World Wide Web at http://www.wdworkshop.com/magazine/2000/mayjun/submit_yourselves.htm.
3. The name of this Greek letter is actually pronounced the same as our letter "p," unless you're a mathematician, in which case you pronounce it like "pie."
4. Note: another Greek word, *kataluma* (κατάλυμα), is translated "inn" in Luke 2:7. But it usually means "guest room," or "dinning room," (Mark 14:14; Luke 22:11), and it's also totally unrelated to the word *pornē*.
5. Book 5, chapter I, section 2, in *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, William Whiston, translator, (John C. Winston Company, n.d.), p. 141.
6. Donald H. Madvig, "Joshua" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 3 (Zondervan, 1992), p. 259.
7. Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Vol. 6 (InterVarsity, 1996), p. 84.
8. Op. cit., p. 142.
9. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, Harris, Archer and Waltke, eds. (Moody Press, 1980), p. 246.
10. Ibid.
11. Although sometimes in a figurative sense, cf., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich and Danker, eds., (University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 693.