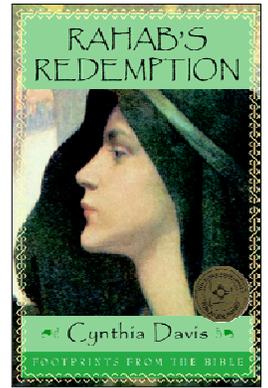


Rahab's Redemption by Cynthia Davis

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Chapter 1

My father owned the best known inn between the Tigris and Damascus. Hamash was one of the fortunate of the city. We had enough wealth to live in a comfortable house across the courtyard from the sheds and pens where the animals were housed. Most of the inhabitants of Jericho and the surrounding towns bedded their animals in their homes. The very poor slept in a hovel with the beasts. Some residents were able to provide a second floor of family sleeping quarters. Our dozen servants, mostly slaves from the northern hills or southern desert slept in the lofts above the animals. I never thought about the men and women who waited on my every need. It was the way my life was. I pitied my friends who did not have someone to comb and braid their hair in the morning.

My three brothers were half-grown by the time I was born. Perez at thirteen was oldest. Jonadab, a year younger, was a constant shadow for his brother. Hamul, the youngest was ten. There were other children who did not live past the dangerous and tragic infant years. Mother never spoke of the five babies who died so young. My birth when she was twenty-eight was a constant source of joy.

My father loved me. I never really doubted that. With his love came the expectation of great accomplishments. I dreamed of marriage to the son of the *gal*, the chief of Jericho. Hamash of Jericho had even higher aspirations.

“My little princess, you will make me proud.” Nearly every day the man crooned his dreams to me. “With your amazing red hair and gentle ways, you are certain to attract the eye of an important man when the time is ripe. Who knows, perhaps the priests will set you aside for service to Astarte.”

What my father said was partly true. I did have hair that flamed in the sunlight. The gentle ways and soft words of an obedient woman were harder to learn. I had a way of speaking my mind that my mother and the women of the household deplored. Both Mother and Father were very indulgent of me. My childhood was filled with much greater freedom than most girls of Jericho. Hamash encouraged me to ask questions frowned on by my nurse. I was always intrigued by the multiplicity of the gods worshipped by our guests. It seemed strange that each nation had different gods.

“How can there be so many gods?” My question at five brought a smile to my mother’s face although her answer was less than satisfactory.

“Someday you will understand,” was all she would say.

I knew that the woman did not find the endless procession of gods and goddesses confusing. To her the pantheon of Astarte, Baal and the rest were not frightening

individuals controlling human life with rage and might. Unlike most of the residents of Canaan, my mother trusted the goodness as well as the power of the holy ones. She believed that every god was only a manifestation of some single greater power. To my child's mind each god was another in a succession of somewhat frightening rulers more powerful than even the chief of the city. The *gal*, had the power of life and death over the inhabitants but the gods controlled each person's destiny.

Our home was shared with an ever changing and endlessly fascinating stream of visitors to the inn. Eagerly I listened, learned and watched the guests with their news from far away. Stories of other cultures and other gods intrigued me. My mother encouraged my curiosity and finally answered my nagging question.

"How can there be so many gods?" I asked the question again when I was six.

"The gods are all one," in her response was the essence of deep faith. "It is people who make the many forms of the gods. We try to control and explain our lives. Ascribing the blame or honor to a deity makes the joys and sorrows of life more bearable. Yet there is One above all. The oldest stories tell of Abraham the Wanderer who came from Ur at the command of that One. His grandson left a legacy in the town called Bethel. He believed it was the very entrance to the house of the god he called *El*."

I knew that the woman referred to the rituals her father still maintained at Bethel.

"The town was named Luz until Jacob, called Israel, met his god there. His vision of a ladder to heaven has always been revered by the residents. A yearly sacrifice from a special herd is made to honor that god. My father was the keeper of the flock. I remember each year he chose the finest animal to honor the *El* of Jacob. Your grandfather swore that it was the blessing of that god which gave me the beauty to attract a man of wealth like your father. My family has a long history of being chosen for honor by the rulers of the heavens. You are one of those touched by the gods as well."

The explanation only confused me further. However, it silenced my questions for a time.

"Your daughter is not a humble servant of the gods." Later, I overheard my mother warn her husband. "In her blood runs the faith of my father who looked beyond the rituals in Bethel to find true understanding."

Father laughed, "My Rahab will learn what is necessary. Do not trouble yourself, Wife, with this talk of faith. The priests can divine who is to serve the goddess. There is no need for her to practice humility. My daughter is special and marked by Astarte."

Jericho was dedicated to Astarte, goddess of the moon, fertility and war. Her worship dominated every aspect of life. Each home had a representation of at least one of the favored animals of the goddess in some niche. In our house each room had an image of the goddess. My bedroom was no exception. Above the door a proud winged lion guarded me on behalf of his mistress. I feared the figure for the creature seemed to be waiting to pounce should I fail to fulfill the destiny everyone said I was plainly marked for.

“The mark of the blessed lady is on you,” old Hulda, my nurse, fondly stated again and again, usually when combing and braiding my heavy red hair. She firmly believed that Astarte had set me apart. “You were born on the date of her Feast. It is well known that such as you are beloved by the gods.”

Astarte was known to have a brilliant head of flame colored hair. Her priestesses dyed their brown or black hair the same color with henna. That I was born with curls of the favored color set me apart. It was an embarrassment to me. Other children teased mercilessly especially Elon, son of the potter.

“Rahab was dipped in henna.”

“Carrot curls from eating too many carrots.”

“How can you sleep with flames on your head?”

At first I ran home sobbing from the boy’s words. Always Hulda and my mother would comfort me.

“Astarte marks those she has chosen. Some are known by the mark of her kiss on their body like Sarah the wife of Elam, captain of the soldiers of Jericho,” the old nurse assured me. “The city was richly blessed when she served as Daughter of Astarte.”

The woman had a dramatic red imprint starting under her right eye and disappearing under the neck of her tunic. Although she usually pulled her veil tight around her face in public, I saw her at the well once when the wind whipped her veil away.

“I am glad I’m not marked like that.” My horrified whisper was met with a soft chuckle from both women.

“Your hair is your beauty as well as the sign of Astarte’s favor,” Mother’s confident words gave me courage to face my tormentors. I even began to be proud of my looks.

“Astarte has chosen me over you, Elon.” Standing boldly in the middle of the street I shouted a childish defiance to my nemesis. “The gods will punish you for your words.”

The chubby boy laughed at me.

“The flames have gone to your mind,” he jeered.

“You will see.” I tossed my head and turned away in pretended disdain. It would never do to let the boy see the stinging tears brimming in my eyes. “Astarte will feed you to the dogs.”

I felt a clod of dirt strike my shoulder. I refused to turn around until I reached my gate. Then the shrieking behind me made me look. The boy was beating off a large dog that had him by the arm. All the other children were racing away with cries of terror and screams for help. Terrified at what my words caused, I ran wailing to my father.

“Elon...dog...help,” the gasped and sobbed words along with the cries from the street sent Hamash and two servants on a run from the yard.

I cowered in a corner of the sheep pen sobbing in terror until Perez found me. My brother carried me to my mother. Even there I continued to sob and whimper.

"I did not mean it," almost hysterical, I wept in her lap. "It is my fault that the goddess struck Elon!"

"Elon has been tormenting that dog for weeks. Today the gate was open and the animal got his revenge." Even my father's explanation did nothing to ease my conscience.

I repeated over and over with tears, "It is my fault. I said Astarte would send dogs to eat him."

Finally Hulda coaxed me to drink some tea. The herbs in the infusion allowed me to sleep. Still in my dreams I saw the great jaws of the dog chasing me and cried out. When I wakened, I was cradled in my mother's arms on her sleeping mat. I had not been held so since I was weaned at three. Lying very still, I stared out the small window that let in a soft spring breeze and the early morning light. In the western sky, just above the hills of Canaan, the fading sliver of Astarte looked like a barely open eye balefully watching me.

"I am sorry Astarte," with the slightest of whispers I begged forgiveness and then covered my head with the blanket.

I remained hidden until my mother drew away the covering. "Come, Rahab, it is morning. You cannot sleep all day."

Fearfully I peered toward the window, half expecting the eye to still be staring in condemnation. All I saw was sun lighting the tops of the hills. Astarte had gone to her palace for the day.

Elon did not die, but his arm hung useless. Every time I saw the boy I was reminded of the results of my rage. Neither Hulda nor my parents were able to convince me that the bully brought about his own punishment.

"I cursed Elon," sadly I explained over and over. "I warned him that Astarte would feed him to the dogs. And it happened!"

Nothing anyone said was able to convince me that the goddess had not acted on my behalf.