

*RESOLVIENDO: NARRATIVES OF SURVIVAL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND IN*  
CUBA TODAY

by

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RESOLVIENDO: NARRATIVES OF SURVIVAL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND IN  
CUBA TODAY

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## Introduction

The story of Rahab in Joshua 2 has been traditionally interpreted as the account of a foreign woman and low-status prostitute who changes the course of her life when she converts to Yahweh, the God of Moses. In return for her faithful act of saving the spies sent by Joshua to search the land of Canaan, Rahab along with her family obtains salvation, once her city of Jericho is destroyed. Rahab reappears in the New Testament where she is remembered in Jesus' genealogy in the Gospel of Mathew 1:5.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Jael in Judges 4:17-23 has commonly been read as Jael's violent act of killing Sisera, king Jabin's commander in chief, with a tent peg to his temple while he is asleep. She is also regarded as someone who fails to fulfill the hospitality codes of her society.<sup>2</sup>

The story of Jephthah and his unnamed daughter in Judges 10:6-12:7 describes the tragic event in which Jephthah makes a foolish and horrible vow offering his innocent

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<sup>1</sup> Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 36-52. Judaism perceives Rahab as a prophet and proselyte of faith. See H.L. Strack und Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (München: Beck, 1924), 20-33.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1895), 20; Robert G. Boling, *Judges: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 97-100; J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 78. As for the failure to fulfill the codes of hospitality Victor H. Matthews reminds us that in this story both Sisera and Jael failed to observe such codes. See Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* Vol. 21 no.1. Spring (1991): 13-21.

daughter in sacrifice to God. Typically this text is read as Jephthah being immensely irresponsible and his daughter being the poor victim who pays for her father's oath.<sup>3</sup>

Such interpretations of these stories are widely accepted within the scholarly biblical guild. But perhaps there are also other ways in which they may be read. In this dissertation I propose that the stories of Rahab, Jael, and Jephthah can be particularly enriched in order to give hope to contemporary contexts of hardship, especially when they are read through the Cuban notion of *resolviendo*.

The word *resolviendo*,<sup>4</sup> meaning to find an answer or solution,<sup>5</sup> was first used this way in Cuba at the beginning of the 1990s. It was then that Cuba began to suffer the economic consequences of the fall of socialist countries from which a great part of its resources and economic help had come during the previous four decades. Without subsidies Cuba and its people had to create new economic opportunities. This was not an

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<sup>3</sup> Boling, *Judges*, 206-210; Cheryl J. Exum, "The Tragic Vision and the Biblical Narrative: the Case of Jephthah," in *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus*, ed. Cheryl J. Exum (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 66-67.

<sup>4</sup> I use the word *resolviendo* and *resolver* to describe the term that has been coded by Cubans to explain the reality of survival they are facing. I also use *resolviendo* as the participle that describes the action of the verb *resolver*. Sometimes I use the verb *resolver* to describe the same action as *resolviendo*. Finally I employ the conjugated form of the verb in the third person plural (*resuelven*) to point out people's action of dealing with survival and to solve (*resolver*) a situation.

<sup>5</sup> *Resolver* is originally a Latin word that means to release, to let go. Among its several meanings in Spanish one finds: to strongly take some determination; to resume, to sum up; to release a difficulty or to give solution to a doubt. *Resolver* also has the connotations of finding a solution to a problem, to carry out an action; and to take a decision on speaking up or doing something. Taken from the web page of the Real Academia Española (September 27, 2005). <http://www.rae.es/>. The closet term to *resolver* is *bregar*. For a detailed analysis on *bregar* see the work of Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, "De cómo y cuándo bregar," in *El arte de bregar: ensayos* (San Juan: Ediciones Callejón, 2003), 15-87



easy task. The Cuban government gave this period of economic crisis the name “special period” in an effort to convince the people that the stringent measures put into effect would last only a short time. The government announced a series of restrictions on food, medicines and medical supplies, and gasoline. This “special period,” which continues even 16 years later, creates enormous difficulties for Cubans who can no longer buy what they need to survive with the salary they receive from the socialist government. Specifically, Cuban salaries are sufficient to supply food and other necessities for only half of each month. It is in this context that the words *resolver* and *resolviendo* began to have a special meaning for Cubans. *Resolver* in many ways became synonymous with struggling to survive, making do.

In Cuba, *resolver* has a more particular meaning. It refers to whatever one has to do to obtain the basic things needed to survive. *Resolver* is not about getting what one needs for the long term, but rather, by whatever means one has, to enable one’s family needs to be met for the day. Since the government does not provide the food, medicines, or clothing that the people need and since the people have no money to buy such goods, *resolver* covers a range of activities, including bartering, planting vegetables in one’s garden, or keeping chickens and even pigs in one’s backyard.

*Resolver* also refers to taking “illegally” from the government whatever one is able to use directly to sell or to barter. Since the government owns all businesses and since every single person in Cuba works for the government (the exceptions are the few who work for the churches), people simply take whatever they can from their workplaces. *Resolviendo* has become the main task of most Cubans in order to be able to go on with their lives, to face the situation at hand. Every day Cubans wake up knowing that, besides

doing what is required of them at their jobs, they will also have the additional stress of *resolver*, of obtaining what they and their families need to make it through the day.

*Resolver* is not an individual or isolated task but a communal experience that involves all persons in the struggle for survival.

One of the interesting aspects I have discovered about *resolviendo* is that for Cubans the invention or use of this word becomes itself a way of *resolver*, for the word covers and legitimizes the struggle for survival. At the same time, having a word to identify the action also legitimates the painful dilemma of dealing with these types of uncomfortable situations where atypical behaviors and actions that may not be considered moral are required in order to preserve life. Thus, to survive that struggle of breaking laws and moral codes, the word *resolviendo* is in itself a way of *resolver* or coming to terms with this issue.<sup>6</sup>

*Resolver* starts when people find themselves in extremely difficult situations and have to find ways of making it through the day. To find solutions, people have to change the ways in which they have dealt with everyday life. *Resolver* requires one to change the patterns in one's life, to shift one's values, and to make accommodations. I have watched this process in Cuba, in my own life and in the lives of my family and friends. We have put aside certain values in order to hold on to the highest value: life. *Resolver* becomes a

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<sup>6</sup> I am aware that when talking about *resolviendo* ethical questions may arise. I think that *resolviendo* and ethics are not separate. We cannot ask what role ethics plays in *resolviendo*. They are one and the same thing. By this I mean *resolviendo* is itself an ethic, an uncommon and atypical ethic of survival that shakes the foundation of what traditional ethical understandings may be to fight to preserve life as the central common good for humanity. Among untraditional and morally questioned ways of survival one can also find situations of just war, killing another human being as a way of preserving innocent lives or stealing from those who are more fortunate to allow the less fortunate and the poorest to survive.

way of facing life, of understanding life, its value and its requirements for survival. It is how one thinks about life: one has to *resolver* in order to live, and one lives in order to *resolver*. *Resolver* makes one be constantly on the lookout for opportunities to obtain the bare necessities of life, like food, medicine, and clothing. If one is not able to *resolver*, one's life is in jeopardy.

Key features of *resolviendo* include these facets among others:

limit or boundary situations

preserving life at any cost

awareness of present reality

openness to face a limit situation

sadness and suffering as part of *resolviendo*

taking small steps to survive today

how women and men *resolver*

prostitution or “selling the body” for survival

women and children's survival and

humor as a way of survival.

Discussion of these aspects is enriched by reference to the works of scholars like philosopher Karl Jaspers, feminist theologian Ivone Gebara, and Cuban writer Jorge Mañach. I further illustrate the elements of *resolviendo* by looking at narratives of Cuban writers who left Cuba in the decade when this term emerged. Although the narratives described in the Cuban novels (*Posesas de la Habana*; *La nada cotidiana*; and *El*

*hombre, la hembra y el hambre*) are fictional, they certainly reveal the reality that Cuban people faced during the 1990s and are still facing today.

### Key features of *Resolviendo*

#### Limit or boundary situation

*Resolviendo* happens when people find themselves in limit or boundary situations.

Karl Jaspers's work on boundary situations illustrates the reality in which people are immersed in Cuba today. His definition of a boundary situation is:

Situations like the following: that I am always in situations; that I cannot live without struggling and suffering; that I cannot avoid guilt; that I must die—these are what I call boundary situations. They never change, except in appearance. There is *no way to survey them* in existence, no way to see anything behind them. They are like a wall we run into, a wall on which we founder.<sup>7</sup>

Jaspers' definition of what constitutes a boundary situation sparks several ideas at once. First, suffering, guilt, and death shape a boundary situation. These realities of life in one way or another make an impact on people's lives, putting them in some way at the limit of their existence, in a place where they are stuck. As Jaspers well states, such a situation is like a wall behind which it is difficult to see anything.

Jaspers reminds us that in concrete situations of life we try to preserve life at any cost, adapting ourselves to suffering and trying to overcome it, but in the end only being able to surrender to it. In the face of this reality, Jaspers suggests that one way of facing boundary situations is not by planning or calculating to overcome them, but by being

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<sup>7</sup> Karl, Jaspers, *Philosophy*. Vol 2 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 178.

ourselves, entering such situations with our eyes open.<sup>8</sup> Then, Jasper suggests, there are situations which we cannot get out of and cannot see through.<sup>9</sup> Where we are not in control and do not have the knowledge to perceive what to do, the only way out is by grasping the situation existentially. We have no choice but to live in the situation, and only by being immersed in it will we get through it.

According to Jaspers, the first boundary situation is that in “*existence I am always in a particular situation.*”<sup>10</sup> As human beings we are not universal, not the sum of all possibilities. People exist in specific social circumstances revealed at a certain time in history, whether as a man or a woman, young or old. Thus, a situation, and in this case a boundary situation, defines the totality of people’s existence physically and spiritually. People are also defined as particular kinds of subjects, for example as young or old, man or woman. The larger boundary situation that can exist in a society at some point is not an abstract entity, but rather a reality incarnated in people’s time and space. Thus, limit situations represent very concrete realities.

#### Preserving life at any cost

The ultimate goal of *resolviendo* is to survive and preserve life at any cost. As Jaspers states, “The objective of my *conscious struggle* against an opponent I can see is to expand my living space. It may be waged economically, by peaceful means, or by force of war, by surprising achievements, by trickery and harmful measures—in effect,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 183.

an equally cruel fight goes on everywhere if the stakes are the expense of material existence, and ultimately life or death.”<sup>11</sup> When life is at stake, it does not matter how we handle the struggle, means, and goals. *Resolviendo* is about people getting what they need in order to survive, regardless of how peacefully or fiercely that struggle may take place, and regardless of whether it happens by trickery or other unconventional ways. In the following fragment from the novel *Posesas de la Habana*<sup>12</sup> Elsa, one of the characters tells us about her neighbor’s job:

“Pancho Rivera works as a security guard at Carlos Tercero Mall and every now and then he sells chocolate candies and soda cans that he steals from the stores. Well, I don’t criticize him. In the end one has to defend oneself.”<sup>13</sup>

Stealing is Pancho’s way of *resolver*. When there are no other choices available, stealing is simply an unconventional way of preserving one’s life. Being able to sell what he steals from the store gives Pancho the money he needs to survive. Stealing is wrong, but when people face a limit situation, preserving life is the highest good even if it entails deception, stealing, and other normally unethical behaviors.

#### Awareness of present reality

The idea of a situation that encompasses a person’s entire reality can be seen by the ways Cubans *resuelven*. Their awareness can be seen in their ability to name the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>12</sup> Teresa Dovalpage, *Posesas de la Habana* (Los Angeles: Pureplay Press, 2004). The closest translation to the title of this novel would be *Prisoners of Havana*. *Posesas de la Habana* tells the story of a Cuban family in the nineties who during a night of blackout reflect on their present lives as well as the past several decades prior to the Revolution in 1959. Through dialogue among the characters we witness the reality of people who strive to survive in present day Cuba and how they achieve this end.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13.

reality that encompasses their lives, to recognize the adverse circumstances that shape their existence. Because of this, *resolviendo* seems an appropriate response for dealing with the reality in which they are involved and from which they see no escape. To defend oneself (*defenderse*) thus describes the reality of survival, in this case the very act of stealing from the government at the workplace. By calling it defense of self, the characters soften or justify the magnitude of the act of stealing that otherwise carries a negative moral connotation. Beyond showing Cubans' awareness of their critical context, this fragment also shows how using different words to describe the act of survival (*defenderse*) is in itself a way of *resolver*, of dealing with the uncomfortable situation of stealing goods from the government.

#### Openness to face a limit situation

*Resolviendo* requires people to face the situation at hand. Jaspers suggests that we open our eyes and ourselves and do what is necessary to survive in limit or boundary situations instead of trying to overcome them. It is this openness in the midst of their struggle for survival that allows Cubans to find creative ways to get through many difficulties. There is nothing Cuban people can do to change the overall present situation. What they have done and continue to do is to find ways around and within the boundary situations in order to survive and not be overpowered. In the following fragment of the novel *La nada cotidiana*, one sees how the main character Yocandra resolves her conflict, not by inventing something new but rather by finding solutions within her own difficult situation. Here the author presents us with a sad and quite detailed account of what Yocandra, like many Cubans today, manages to eat.

I finally woke up with a sip of coffee, I brushed my teeth, had water with brown sugar and a quarter of the eighty grams of yesterday's bread for breakfast. I had managed our daily bread very well. When we have it, --if we have it!, —I cut it in four pieces: one piece for lunch, another for dinner, and the third one before I go to bed, and, if I have not shared it already with someone who comes to visit me, the fourth one is for breakfast. Then, I brushed my teeth again. I have toothpaste thanks to a neighbor who exchanged it with me for the soy ground beef, because honestly I cannot eat that stuff. God knows what they use to make that poisoned and smelly dirty thing. I am being forced to become a vegetarian, although there are no vegetables either.<sup>14</sup>

Sadness and suffering as part of *resolviendo*

*Resolviendo* occurs within a framework where suffering is not avoidable but in fact utterly definitive. As in other countries in crisis, Cubans have had to sell valuable property and artwork in order to get what they need to survive. In *La nada cotidiana* the author presents us with this heartrending reality:

But the scarceness increased and my mother, little by little, had to let go of the treasures of the mansion, as she used to call them. It was not an exception that day when I found her in the living room with a sad face hugging a Gallé's vase. In front of her, a woman laid out a yunte sack. Inside there was a dead pig: in that way we will have meat for a month.<sup>15</sup>

The sadness of having to let go of valuable pieces of art lies not just in the loss to the family but in the insignificant gain. Irreplaceable treasures are exchanged, not for

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<sup>14</sup> Zoe Valdés, *La nada cotidiana* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1996), 29. The closest translation to the title of this novel would be *The Everyday Nothing*. Here Valdés explores through the character Patria life in contemporary Cuba in the 1990s. By narrating the personal events of Yocandra, her family, friends, and lovers, Valdés lays out the complexities of life and helps us understand through the characters' situation the space and reality of Cubans at this present time in the island.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.



some enormous amount of food to enjoy over a protracted time, but rather for a scanty amount to last only a short time.

Taking small steps to survive today

In Cuba people *resuelven* by doing little things that will change and benefit their lives for a short period of time—for the day. Although they are very small steps, they are nonetheless ways in which they can bring new meanings to their lives and provide hope for the future as they strive in the daily struggle. Here is an example:

I usually stop being lazy around the lunch time. Then I open my backpack, I pull out the piece of bread from the plastic wrap, half a banana, and I drink my little bottle of water with brown sugar, swapped at the sugar refineries. It is the end of the month and I still have coffee. What a heroic situation! But that almost never happens. If this month I still have it, it is because I exchanged a bar of soap for a small coffee package.<sup>16</sup>

In another text the same character reflects:

In front of the mirror I think about eternity, with a mouth full of toothpaste—this month I exchanged chickpea beans for it.<sup>17</sup>

These two samples have a common theme: the temporality of actions for survival. What people get to eat on one particular day is not necessarily what they will have the next day or coming month. In Yocandra's case she still is able to drink coffee as she

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 30. The government provides the package of coffee mentioned here. Since 1961 each person in Cuba is given a ration card that, in theory, provides all the staples and other items people need monthly. Of course with the present crisis this card offers only a few things, for instance, three eggs per person per month and half a bar of soap per person per month. Everything is carefully measured out at the store (*bodega*) and given to the people.

<sup>17</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, 72.

notes, *this month*, because she exchanged a bar of soap for it. The same happens with the toothpaste. She has it, because *this month* she has exchanged it for chickpeas.

Within this overall picture of protecting and defending life, it is important to remember that as human beings we are limited in the basic changes we can make in the world as a whole. Acting in a boundary situation is not about bringing solutions to everything everywhere but about struggling to change small things that ultimately will have at least have some impact on others and ourselves. The only thing that, according to Jaspers, is impossible for people to do in a boundary situation is to shut their eyes to the struggle “as if life were possible without it.”<sup>18</sup>

#### Women and men *resolviendo*

Gender plays a key role in the way in which people *resuelven* in Cuba. Gender is not a category that deals merely with stories or issues about women. It is a fluid socio-constructed category that has shaped both men’s and women’s lives throughout history. Like age, social status, and class<sup>19</sup> gender is part of the fabric of Cuban society. However, these categories do not by themselves constitute a mechanism of *resolviendo*. They just mirror the struggle Cuban people endure every day as they *resuelven*. Looking at gender as a thread that is part of this fabric of *resolviendo* is a more difficult task than one might

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<sup>18</sup> Jaspers, *Philosophy*, 211.

<sup>19</sup> After Fidel Castro legalized the American dollar as acceptable currency in Cuba in 1993, different ranks in class status have emerged in Cuban society distinguishing those people who have access to dollars from those who do not. I believe that class has always been part of Cuban society, no matter the particular politics of the day. Prior to 1993, most Cubans belonged to the same working class, enjoying the same privileges and opportunities. However, the elite of the Cuban government have always enjoyed a more privileged status with access to resources and places in Cuba and abroad not granted to working-class Cuban people.

suppose because in Cuba survival is a communal task that demands the participation of everyone whether individually or as part of a family household.

Finding the appropriate theoretical framework to address how gender affects *resolviendo* has been one of the challenges of this section. *Resolviendo* is a task that involves both men and women. They are both equally concerned about the reality of scarcity that surrounds them and the need to take action to change their current situation, but they express this concern in different ways. The novel fragments already cited point to this reality. Ways of *resolver* are distinctive not because of individuals' physical or intellectual strength or creativity, but because of gender boundaries that societies have established. Sometimes men have to perform tasks usually seen as belonging to women. Typically men's alternatives are stealing from their workplace or making crafts and selling them to tourists. But here a highly educated man finds another way to get money to survive.<sup>20</sup>

The only thing I care about is to live well and I did it thanks to my job. I am Toño's assistant; do you remember him? Now he is the butcher of the neighborhood...Of course I finished college! But why would I want a degree in economics in a country where the economy is going to hell? Besides, you know how much is the salary of a college graduate? Two hundred and fifty pesos: five dollars a month. And what I am going to do with five dollars a month with a wife and three kids?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This example shows a common phenomenon in present Cuba where highly educated people leave their jobs as physicians, engineers, psychologists, etc., to work in places with access to dollars. Most of the doormen, waiters, housekeepers, and taxi drivers found in hotel resorts in Cuba are men and women with a college degree. By working in these places they have access to tips from foreigners, leftover food, clothing, or anything else they can lay their hands on that will help them and their families. See Charles Trumbull, "Prostitution and Sex Tourism in Cuba," in *Cuba in Transition*: Vol. 11 (2004): 356-371.

<sup>21</sup> Daína, Chaviano, *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* (Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1998), 28. The translation of this title would be *Man, Woman and Hunger*. In this novel Chaviano explores the lives of four characters in contemporary Cuba. Rubén is

Women also endure the difficult task of getting what they and their family need to make it through the day. They take advantage of any situation that allows them to find solutions to their desperate problems:

Nubia knew that her friend Claudia survived thanks to the help of a mysterious benefactor, whom she did not know. He used to pass Claudia some of the translations he received from the publishing company. Claudia worked on them in her house and later she returned them to him so he could submit them at the editorial company pretending that they were his. He will receive the check and after cashing it he will give the money to Claudia.<sup>22</sup>

There are several elements that are part of the struggle for survival here. First, there is an aspect of deception. The male friend gets the material for his friend to translate and he submits the finished product to the publishing company pretending he did the translations. Second, there is a sense of solidarity between friends. One friend is willing to risk his job by lying about who does the translation just to help his friend to survive.<sup>23</sup> Thus, solidarity is one of the aspects that shape *resolviendo* as friends and families unite in the struggle for survival.

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a professor who had been expelled from the school of art and now makes his living selling crafts to tourists. Gilberto is an economist who currently works as a butcher. In the novel both men remember the two women with whom they fell in love and have not seen since. They both explore the mysterious attraction of their women and the mark that such love left in their lives. One is Claudia, a history of art specialist, who besides her atheist education has paranormal experiences. The other one is an enigmatic prostitute called Mora, a woman of few words. Though the author suggests here that in a context of survival, life can become reduced to food and sex, I propose that people are also hungry to find themselves in the midst of a society that, although radically different from what they would wish it to be, is nonetheless their own.

<sup>22</sup> Chaviano, *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, 47-48.

<sup>23</sup> I do not justify the deceitful aspect in this fragment, but I do believe that within a context of survival where preserving life is at stake, deceit and many other normally inappropriate moral behaviors may be acceptable.

Women and men survive in Cuba doing whatever they can, taking advantage of any situation that presents itself. In some of the fragments one sees how people use their professional training for *resolver*. In others, professional training does not benefit at all in the struggle for survival.

Prostitution or “selling the body” for survival

Besides leaving professional jobs to work at menial labor or making crafts to sell to tourists, prostitution or “selling the body” is another phenomenon that has appeared in Cuba as part of the “special period.”<sup>24</sup> The work of Ivone Gebara<sup>25</sup> is particularly valuable in considering how people survive poverty and oppression, because it addresses that reality precisely from the place of poor people in Latin America.<sup>26</sup>

Selling one’s body (or *jineterismo*)<sup>27</sup> is something done by both women and men, but admittedly mostly by women.<sup>28</sup> Although brief, the following piece from *Posesas de*

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<sup>24</sup> Here I join Ivone Gebara in making a distinction between prostitution and selling one’s body for survival. The difference between them will be addressed in more detail later in this section. See Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experience of Evil and Salvation*, translated by Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Ivone, Gebara. "The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America" in *Searching the Scripture*, ed. Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, vol.1 (New York : Crossroad, 1993), 172-186; and *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Although Gebara’s *locus* of her work is in the Latin American context especially in Brazil, I think it provides an important theoretical framework when looking at issues of women’s sex trades in other societies.

<sup>27</sup> *Jineteras* (hustlers; the word literally means jockeys). *Jineteras* is used for female prostitutes while *jineteros* is used for male prostitutes. The action of prostitution is called *jineteo* while *jineterismo* is the noun used to describe such action. For a detailed study on prostitution in Cuba see Trumbull, “Prostitution and Sex,” 356-71.

*la Habana* shows an example of male *jineterismo*. Here Ernesto's grandmother reflects on her grandson's job:<sup>29</sup>

I adore Ernesto, but honestly, just from the front side. He lives through the behind. His business is to rent his butt to foreign guys. Yes, they think I do not know! Maybe it is because he does not have any other choice to survive, but regardless of how you look at it, it is disgusting.<sup>30</sup>

This piece describes a homosexual selling his body but this is not an activity of gays alone. Prostitution in Cuba today is equally practiced by homosexual and heterosexuals, men and women.<sup>31</sup> However since this phenomenon occurs more in women than men, the feminist contribution of Ivone Gebara on women's realities in Latin America offers insights into issues of survival of women and *jineteras* in Cuba today.

One of the categories developed by Gebara is *lo cotidiano*.<sup>32</sup> Gebara explores the poverty that daily affects women's lives. This social phenomenon oppresses women, keeps them from living fully, from having the basic things (i.e. shelter and food) that they and their loved ones need in order to survive every day, and brings them to the edge of despair and death. One of the consequences of poverty is to have to turn to "selling sex"

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>29</sup> I am aware that the tone of this fragment is vulgar and shows the homophobia of the culture toward homosexuality and homosexuals. However, I think it is important to show that *jineterismo* is a phenomenon that involves both men and women.

<sup>30</sup> Dovalpage, *Posesas de la Habana*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Trumbull, "Prostitution and Sex," 363.

<sup>32</sup> *Lo cotidiano* means everyday life. This term is also used by Mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz. *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 2004); *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1996).

in order to survive. Gebara insists on the expression “selling sex” instead of using any form of the word “prostitution” to make clear that the women are not giving up their values but that they are using their bodies to get what they need in order to survive another day. In this way they are able to get what society should have provided for them in the first place.

Many of the *jineteras* in Cuba are professional people who, like the character Claudia, with her university background in the history of art, think this way about prostitution before becoming a *jinetera*.<sup>33</sup>

But I don't want to become another Sissi who even had to change her name. She says it is for protection, a common custom among ones of the same profession, a mask like the one used by the geishas, those Japanese whores and wives who sold their bodies after being women of culture for many years. That is what Cuban women have become: the geishas of the Western hemisphere. What was the point of having treatises about art, discussions about the philosophical schools in Pericles' times, lectures about the Hegelian origins of Marxism, disquisitions about neoclassicism, tours of Old Havana to study the buildings that we have passed so many times without realizing that they were the best examples of Caribbean baroque?; to end up in bed with a guy in exchange for food?<sup>34</sup>

Claudia reflects on the agony of becoming a *jinetera*, the frustration of being a highly educated woman and yet not able to sustain herself. Deeply aware as she is of her daily life, her intellectual analysis of the reality of Cuban women and their choices for survival points out to her the reality that affects her existence as well as the world to which she and other women belong. As Gebara states, women are subjects of their own

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<sup>33</sup> In my Th.M. thesis at Emory University entitled *My Body, my Salvation: Women's Survival in the Book of Ruth and in Cuba Today*, I explore more deeply the realities of prostitutes in Cuba.

<sup>34</sup> Chaviano, *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, 42-43.

struggles, capable of relating not only to their own situations but also to other human beings and the world. Women are immersed *in* and *with* the world that surrounds them.

#### Women and children's survival

Survival is a key element that influences the vast majority of women and children living in Latin America. Survival refers not only to physical survival, having what one needs every day, like food and shelter. Survival for most women and children in Latin America is almost the whole of their historical reality, which “encompasses every other kind of reality, including the material, the biological, the personal and the social.”<sup>35</sup>

Gebara highlights the fact that survival has to do with the right of women to be treated as persons with respect and dignity. According to her, the lack of self-worth women suffer every day in their struggle for survival affects them greatly not only “in relation to men but as women in themselves.”<sup>36</sup> Gebara points out how women are increasingly valued merely as objects-- objects of pleasure or of hatred. As women internalize this way of being seen by society, it is rare to find ordinary and poor women who perceive themselves as valuable and autonomous human beings to be treated with respect. This affects how they deal with life and how they tend to accept as fate their being treated unjustly.

Throughout history women have been more associated with body and bodily functions than men. The biological processes that women endure (menstruation, pregnancy, birth, lactation) have contributed to a view that portrays them as more earthy—and more sinful-- persons than men. This disturbing view about women has

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>36</sup> Gebara, *Out of the Depths*, 34.



pushed feminist scholars in theology and related fields to redefine women's sexuality and therefore their identities. Women's experience and knowledge (thinking and feeling) are two important dimensions that are incarnated in women's bodies, in their experiences as subjects.<sup>37</sup>

Gebara's analysis of the difficult reality that affects women and children can be seen in the narratives cited. In both pieces the idea of selling women's bodies is deeply shaped by a sheer sense of survival, of getting the food they and their children need. The following example from a novel shows one financial struggle face that makes women in Cuba contemplate the idea of selling their bodies.

"Thank God I gave birth recently." Nubia looked at her without understanding.

"Why?"

"Do you remember Paula, my neighbor?"

"Yes."

"Her twins had their seventh birthday last week and they lost their right to get milk.<sup>38</sup> Paula is going crazy. Yesterday she confessed to me that she is planning to sleep with the manager of a dollar store and see if he gives her two or three liters of milk every week."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Susan A. Ross, "Body," in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 1996), 32. For a more comprehensive discussion on body politics see *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, eds. Paula M. Coe, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Paula M. Coe, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994).

<sup>38</sup> Some years ago the government decided to stop giving milk to children once they turn seven years old. The only people receiving milk nowadays are children under seven years old, pregnant women, senior citizens, or people with particular medical needs.

<sup>39</sup> Chaviano, *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre*, 96.

Here the lack of nutrition for her children moves a mother (Paula) to consider selling her body as a way of *resolver*, something to barter for the milk she needs for her twins. That her children should go without milk is not an option. The only choice she sees left to her is to exchange her body for the food she needs for her children. Paula is not giving up her rights and dignity as a person; rather, she is using her body to provide for her children what the government does not give her in the first place.

#### Humor as a way of survival

In the past decade humor has increasingly become a tool Cubans use to deal with their precarious situation.<sup>40</sup> As Cubans often say, they have learned to laugh at their own disgrace and problems. Being able to laugh diffuses some of the tension inherent in living in an oppressive society in which people are not free to express their own ideas. Joking is also a way for Cubans to criticize the society in which they live. Thus, humor is a way of *resolver*, a mechanism that allows people to get through the day feeling that somehow they can express their feelings and the ideas and frustrations of their own struggles.

In order to understand humor as a tool for survival in Cuba, one first has to understand how humor becomes part of the Cuban way—and this is a difficult task. The closest analysis I have found to address this issue is the work of the Cuban scholar Jorge Mañach's *Crisis de la alta cultura en Cuba: indagación del choteo*.<sup>41</sup> He analyses the

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<sup>40</sup> I say increasingly because humor has always been part of the Cuban idiosyncrasy. Cubans have always been known for their joy and good sense of humor, for being a *pueblo alegre*, a joyful people even during the most difficult times.

<sup>41</sup> Jorge Mañach. *Crisis de la alta cultura en Cuba: indagación del choteo* (Miami, Florida: Ediciones Universal, 1991). I thank Dr. Fernando F. Segovia for pointing out the work of Jorge Mañach to me. Growing up in Cuba I had never heard of

emergence of *choteo*<sup>42</sup> in Cuban culture. However, the Cuba that Mañach refers to in 1928 is far different from the context I address in this project.<sup>43</sup> Here, I deal more with *choteo*, the humor we see in Cuban society nowadays.

In *Indagación del Choteo* Mañach indicates how different political, socio-economic, and social changes that affected Cuba during the first decades of the neocolonial Republic (1902-1959) set the scene for the eruption of *choteo*:

The social context, then, with those inevitable modifications and improvisations, has contributed so powerfully to foment the anti-hierarchical spirit of our mockery that one can say it has almost generated *choteo*. More than an inherent tendency of our character, this is the result of a particular collective experience. It is born out of a context instead of an idiosyncrasy.<sup>44</sup>

Attributing *choteo* to a particular *context* instead of to an *idiosyncrasy* is crucial to understand the role of humor in *resolviendo*. As a way of mockery emerging out of a specific socio-political and economic situation, *choteo* is something socially acquired by the Cuban people instead of a quality that is part of their personality. But, what is

*Choteo*? Mañach explains *choteo* as a sort of “...confusion, subversion, lack of order;--to

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this scholar, nor did I study his work while I was a college student in Cuba. Mañach’s work was banned from any humanities program at the Cuban universities because of his ideological disagreement with the Castro regime.

<sup>42</sup> *Choteo* is a difficult word to translate into English. The closest translation would be “mockery.”

<sup>43</sup> Jorge Mañach was a Cuban writer, considered among the most distinguished of his time. He was educated in Cuba, Spain, the United States and France. He graduated from Harvard University in 1920, with a B.A. in Philosophy. From there he continued his higher education at the Université du Droit et de la Santé de Lille in Paris, and then at the University of Havana in Cuba. He was a participant in the revolution of 1933 and in the fight against Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. For a short period of time he was foreign minister of Cuba in 1944. Because of his criticism of the Castro government he was forced to go into exile in 1960. He died in Puerto Rico in 1961. Taken from the web site of Wikipedia (February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007) <http://en.wikipedia.org>

<sup>44</sup> Mañach, *Indagación*, 84.

sum up “relajo.” But what is the meaning of that word if not “to relax all the ties and conjunctures that give to things an aspect of articulation and worthy integrity?”<sup>45</sup> Thus, *choteo* invites people to relax, to take things easy--particularly things and situations that are usually stressful or crucial. The piece cited earlier shows how the character Yocandra uses *choteo* as a way of poking fun at her own situation.

I finally woke up with a sip of coffee, I brushed my teeth, had water with brown sugar and a quarter of the eighty grams of yesterday’s bread for breakfast. I had managed our daily bread very well. When we have it,--if we have it! —I cut it in four pieces: one piece for lunch, another for dinner, and the third one before I go to bed, and, if I have not shared it already with someone who comes to visit me, the fourth one is for breakfast. Then, I brushed my teeth again. I have toothpaste thanks to a neighbor who exchanged it with me for the soy ground beef, because honestly I cannot eat that stuff. God knows what they use to make that poisoned and smelly dirty thing. I am being forced to become a vegetarian, although there are no vegetables either.<sup>46</sup>

To survive one sometimes has to laugh at one’s own disgrace. It is *choteo*--mockery-- that helps Cubans to get through the day. It allows them to continue *resolviendo* everyday and to stay psychologically capable of continuing the struggle for survival.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>46</sup> Valdés, *La nada cotidiana*, 29.

## Conclusion and Outline of Chapters

This introduction has laid out the context of *resolviendo* as a mechanism of survival in Cuba. This context of survival of which I was part of until my arrival in the U.S.A deeply shapes my hermeneutical lens as a Hebrew Bible scholar and thus my engagement with the biblical text. This dissertation offers *resolviendo* as another hermeneutical lens through which texts of hardship and survival can be read.

In the following chapters I illustrate what reading biblical passages through this lens looks like. But first, by way of background, in Chapter One, I lay out the scholarship of the field on the Deuteronomistic History (DH)—the body of literature where our stories of Rahab, Jael, and Jephthah are located. In a second section of this chapter, I explain the different common methodological approaches to the texts I will be using. These hermeneutical approaches are: reader-response criticism; socio-historical/social-science approaches; cultural criticism; post-colonial approach; gender and feminist approaches; and postmodern approach. Last of all, I discuss narrative criticism as my preferred methodological approach for this project.

In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I explore at length the traditional readings of the Rahab, Jael, and Jephthah stories. The first sections of each chapter explain what the scholarship of the field has said about these stories, how they have been interpreted. A second section offers my own reading of these stories using the lens of *resolviendo*.

The conclusion to this project integrates all the pieces previously discussed looking at new issues and questions raised throughout the project. One set of questions to ask is whether *resolviendo* can be used as a lens to read other biblical passages where survival is at stake, and if so, what those texts might be. What is it about them that make

the notion of *resolviendo* present? Another concern is whether the notion of *resolviendo* will change or disappear once the current political system changes in Cuba. Is *resolviendo* only politically and economically conditioned? Or is it more a “way of living” that has permeated the lives of Cubans in the island and therefore re-defines Cuban identity? Last, there are questions on the universality of *resolviendo* and its connections to other contexts. Here I want to explore connections between both texts –the Cuban contemporary reality and the biblical texts. Also, are there possible parallels of *resolviendo* with other cultures and social contexts?

## Chapter 1

### Methodological Landscape

#### Methodological Background

My approach to the Hebrew Bible is multidimensional.<sup>47</sup> I do not engage in biblical analysis by imposing my social location and applying this context to the text, but rather I enter the text with my social location in mind. I see the texts as a conversation partner, and allow them to speak to me. Because of my own hermeneutical lens of survival I enter this conversation with the biblical text with a particular interest in how people survived in the ancient biblical world. Specifically, I position myself on the side of the oppressed and those characters of the narrative that either live at the margin of the society or have less power ascribed to them, depending on their social status and gender. This is the same location (or in this case, margin) where people in Cuba locate themselves. There, the margin and center are defined according to whether one has the means to survive or not.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> My hermeneutics of *resolviendo* may be seen as a new and creative way of reading the Bible. This dissertation is a way of honoring and naming this reality of survival in Cuba. However, after completing this project I do not feel I shall continue any further study on *resolviendo* if I do not live in the island. In other words, I do not want to exploit *resolviendo* if the *locus* of my work is not on the island. I feel that in order to further talk about the *resolviendo* reality I have to be immersed in it since it is from *that* place that any insights on this hermeneutics would emerge.

<sup>48</sup>For a more contemporary literature on marginality see the works of Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire Building* (University of North Carolina Press, 1992); “Covenanting Nature: Aquacide and the Transformation of Knowledge,” in *Ecotheology* 8. No 1 (2003): 100-118; and “Native Women’s Double Cross: Christology from the Contact Zone,” in *Feminist Theology* 29 (2002): 96-117.

Gender is another lens that informs my hermeneutics. I pay close attention to the relationships between women and men, and the ways in which they interact with each other in my contemporary Cuban context and also the Hebrew Bible.<sup>49</sup>

My hermeneutical lens of survival in itself locates my reading of the biblical text in the margin and deconstructing the center. Thus, I use a postmodern approach that allows me to deconstruct such a center and its power present in the biblical narratives.<sup>50</sup> Further I also address the dynamics between the colonized and the colonizer in the biblical accounts.<sup>51</sup> To some extent this postcolonial approach resonates with my reality of being from Cuba, a country with a neocolonial history.<sup>52</sup> Within the larger scope of literary criticism, I use elements of narrative criticism, examining the chosen narratives through the lenses of the narrators, characters, point of view, and plot, among others.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For literature on gender see footnotes 70 through 75 of this chapter.

<sup>50</sup> For literature on seminal studies see Footnote 77 of this chapter.

<sup>51</sup> For literature on postcolonial studies see Footnote 69 of this chapter.

<sup>52</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, “And they Began to Speak in Other Tongues: Competing Modes of Discourse in Contemporary Biblical Criticism,” in *Reading from this Place*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, vol. 1 *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 3. In the third footnote in his article Fernando Segovia indicates the different colonizer powers that have dominated Cuba throughout history. As someone who claims her main social location from the Cuban context, I resonate with a postcolonial discussion that addresses the realities between colonized and colonizers present in the island. I am aware that I also can talk about my colonizer/colonized experiences of being Latina in the United States. However, in this project I choose to concentrate more on the Cuba context. This is the context that shapes my engagement with the biblical passages.

<sup>53</sup> David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1994); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978); J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*, translated by Ineke Smith (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical*



My methodology is therefore an eclectic combination of several approaches and methodologies—and this is due to the need for multiple voices to be heard. Also, since I do not see other scholars doing this particular work I feel more than ever compelled to define a new approach that allows me to shape a hermeneutic that speaks to a Cuban audience and others that may share a similar social location. Yet rather than using one or two methodologies or even the entirety of the approaches and methodologies I mention, I borrow pieces from them and incorporate them as I encounter various aspects of my project. For instance, I pay attention to those aspects of ancient Israel history that describe the social status of men and women. I do not make use of the entire scope of historical criticism, especially its literary features, but rather focus on the socio-scientific aspects of that methodology that are hermeneutically appropriate.

The same is the case in the use of cultural criticism. While I engage in some socio-economic and ideological discussions of the contexts in the biblical accounts, I do not use that methodology to its fullest extent. My criteria in choosing the hermeneutical approaches are several: for instance, when dealing with the biblical narratives in this project, narrative criticism with its exploration of characters, plot, narrator, etc., offers great insights. In my examination of the relationship between female and male characters of the Jael story, a perspective on feminism and gender studies offers some answers to the questions of power, gender, and the relationship between the two of them. The Rahab

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*Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1981); Gale A. Yee, *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, Harcourt: Brace, 1954), Richard G. Bowman, “Narrative Criticism: Human Purpose in Conflict with Divine Presence,” in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

story reminds us of the struggle posed when the Israelite spies, guided by their leader Joshua, try to conquer Jericho and colonize the Canaanite population. Thus, a concern for a post-colonial approach to this passage is part of the exploration of the text offering new insights into the colonizer/colonized dynamics in the ancient text.

## Previous Scholarship on Deuteronomistic History and Gender Studies

### An Overview of the Deuteronomistic History

In 1943, Martin Noth proposed in his monograph *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* the theory of the Deuteronomistic History (DH). In his hypothesis Noth suggests that the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are the product of a single author. This theory is called DH because its author and its style and content resemble the book of Deuteronomy. Since the time Noth developed this theory of DH, many other biblical scholars in Europe and the United States have continued developing it. The DH theory has been reshaped, challenged, and questioned in many ways over the intervening decades, and its existence has been given almost canonical status in the field of biblical studies. One of the challenges I find in this section is related to the manageability of the Deuteronomistic history: How to include in such limited space the breadth of work done for so many years on the DH? How do I choose the most important material written in this area when all of it in some way or another contributes to the development of this theory? Furthermore, how much of what has been written recently and continues to be written on DH should be included and recognized in this section as a contribution to this topic? Rather than attempting the impossible and tackling it all, here I offer only a few remarks on the history of the research on the DH from Noth's

groundbreaking work to the developments of newer literary criticism and feminist biblical studies, which others scholars have brought to this body of literature.<sup>54</sup>

For Noth there are structural, theological, redactional, and grammatical reasons for proposing the theory of a Deuteronomistic History (DH). Throughout the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings there are four consistent literary features that allow Noth to speculate that these books are the product of a single author. First, he notices that the Hebrew language in these books is pretty straightforward. As he rightly says, “It is the simplest Hebrew in the Old Testament.”<sup>55</sup> This Hebrew does not have any particular artistry or refinement; in fact it contains “frequent repetition of the same simple phrases and sentence constructions.”<sup>56</sup>

Second, Noth notices the regular appearance of speeches and narratives throughout the DH. According to him there are specific passages where the Deuteronomistic author reviews the course of history and draws from it practical consequences for the behavior of the people. For example, Noth points to the speeches in Joshua 1 concerning the occupation of the land; in Joshua 12, the concluding summary of results of the conquest; and in Joshua 23 the farewell speech where Joshua instructs Israel on how to behave in the land. Other speeches and narratives that Noth highlights are in the book of Judges 2, a preview of the course of history of the period of Judges; and 1

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<sup>54</sup> In this section I not only discuss the views of Deuteronomistic History by Martin Noth, but I also pay attention to other perspectives in the DH history of research by A.D.M. Mayes, Hans- Detlef, Hoffmann, R. Smend, and Frank M. Cross.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981), 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

Sam 12 where Samuel gives a speech to the people on the inauguration of the monarchy bringing past events to people's attention as a way of addressing their future life. In addition, in 1 Kgs 4:14 ff Noth notes Solomon's prayer of dedication to the temple where the significance of the new sanctuary for the present and future of the nation is proclaimed. Finally in 2 Kgs 17:7 ff we find a reflection on the catastrophic end to the monarchy period in Israel.<sup>57</sup> As A.D.H. Mayes indicates, the insertion of these speeches and narratives takes place at crucial points in the history of the Israelite nation where reflections on past behaviors of obedience and disobedience to the demands of God are necessary.<sup>58</sup>

A third element that Noth considers foundational for conjecturing the unity of the Deuteronomistic History is its chronology. Regarding the monarchic period the issue of chronology is pretty clear: both chronologies from the kings of the North and South are related in a way that provides a comprehensive single chronology of the monarchic period. The topic of chronology, however, is more complicated when it comes to the pre-monarchic period and early monarchy. Here the summary statement that 408 years separate the Exodus from Egypt and the fourth year of King Solomon when the building of the temple was begun (1 Kgs 6:1) can be reconciled with the detailed chronological information mainly through the omission of the concluding statement of 1 Sam 4:18 that Eli "judged Israel for forty years." This statement could be considered a post-

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<sup>57</sup> A.D.H. Mayes, *The Story of Israel between Settlement Exile: A Redactional Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (London: SMC Press, 1983), 4.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Deuteronomistic addition intended to include Eli in the sequence of the “judges” who preceded Samuel.<sup>59</sup>

The fourth aspect that Noth sees as confirming the unity of the Deuteronomistic History is its theological consistency. According to him, in the DH there is clear lack of positive interest in the cult, which means that the relationship of Yahweh and Israel depends on obedience to the covenant law rather than on sacrifices and other cultic activities.<sup>60</sup> Another aspect present in DH is a retributive perspective on history especially by kings who are responsible for historical disasters occasioned by God.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to these four, Noth notes a final important element. He proposes that the Deuteronomistic author viewed the course of the history of Israel through specific manifestations of divine power that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>62</sup>

Noth’s work on the DH hypothesis, like any new groundbreaking theory in a field, has been both accepted and challenged. For instance, Hans-Detlef Hoffmann<sup>63</sup> does not think that the deuteronomist made use of written sources; he sees the DH as being the result of a redactional tradition. For Hoffmann the idea of a deuteronomist who focuses on written sources undermines the sense of unity that guides the DH. Instead Hoffmann

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>61</sup> Personal conversation with Dr. Leo G. Perdue, February 23, 2008.

<sup>62</sup> A.D.M. Mayes, “Deuteronomistic History,” 268.

<sup>63</sup> Hans- Detlef, Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1980).

argues for a creative and original deuteronomist author who uses mainly oral tradition to construct the history of Israel as a history of cultic reform and reformers.

As we see in Hoffman's argument, scholars have offered different nuances in the methodological approach to the DH. Hoffman, for example, suggests we reconsider the deuteronomist from a historical-critical perspective rather than a redactional one. To do so, he uses a theological argument. Hoffman invites the reader to perceive the deuteronomist as the work of a single and creative author, as Noth does, interested in the whole (telling the history of Israel) and not the parts (paying attention to the written sources). But Hoffmann is not the only biblical scholar who encountered difficulties with the idea of a DH. There are other well-known scholars who also challenged Noth's work and left their influence on it. Among them one finds Wolff, Von Rad, R. Smend, W. Dietrich, T. Veijola, and F.M. Cross.

One common element that appears in the work of each of these scholars is theology. For example, consider the different perspectives they take on Noth's limited view that the Deuteronomist historian had of Israel's history. Scholars like R. Smend and F.M. Cross see the work of the DH not as one of a single author, but as a product of a circle or school of scholars—a notion that allows room for more than one view of Israel's history, and therefore presumably a more open one.<sup>64</sup> R. Smend is one of the exponents who see DH as the work of a school or circle instead of an individual, and his work is followed by the refinements of the Göttingen school. He proposes Dtr as the Deuteronomistic historian; DtrN as the Deuteronomistic editor; and DtrP as the

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<sup>64</sup> R. Smend, "Das Gesetz und die Völker: Ein Beitrag zur Deuteronomistischen Redaktionsgeschichte," in *Probleme biblischer Theologie; Gerhard von Rad zum 70. Geburtstag* (München: C. Kaiser, 1971), 494-509.

Deuteronomistic redactor. F.M Cross, on the other hand, proposes a more complex editorial process of layers of DH or Double Redaction. The first theme-- Dtr 1-- is the sin of Jeroboam and his successors that reaches its climax in the account of the fall of the northern kingdom and in the mediation of that event in 2 Kgs 17:1-23. The second theme--Dtr2-- is the promise of grace to David and his house, which reaches its pivotal point in the account of Josiah's reform in 2 Kgs 22-23.<sup>65</sup>

As much as DH has shaped the field of biblical studies, it has also pushed the conversation beyond the particularities of the topic to search for more layers or themes within the umbrella of DH. Thus, today we find scholars highlighting different approaches within the Deuteronomistic History that focus on thematic pieces in connection to the DH, such as sex, honor, and power.<sup>66</sup> In the following section, I address how issues of gender and social status of men and women take place in ancient Israel. Though I try to limit my research to how these issues operate in the Deuteronomistic History, it has been difficult to find information that is confined to the DH period. Gender issues as well as the social status of women and men in ancient Israel are very much mingled throughout its history. Yet there are some instances in which I can make this distinction.

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<sup>65</sup> F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

<sup>66</sup> Ken Stone, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Anthony F. Campbell, Antony and Mark A. O'Brien. *Unfolding the Deuteronomistic History: Origins, Upgrades, Present Text* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

## Gender in the Deuteronomistic History<sup>67</sup>

Gender is a key element that informs the degree to which women and men participate and exert power in every society. As a 21st century Westerner, I prefer to see a fluidity of gender where male, female, and transgendered people express themselves freely and equally and seek to make their own contribution to their society. However this freedom is not something that is widely available yet. This also is not found in the scenario narrated in the biblical records of the Hebrew Bible. As much as I would love to see this fluidity of gender taking place in our contemporary societies, I would also like to see that it took place in the ancient world. Instead it seems that the ways in which society operated in ancient times is very much shaped by a clear differentiation of gender. In other words, the biblical records reflect a picture where traditions, sages, and institutions (e.g. temple, palace) support and perpetuate a power that is assigned and given to males. Women, because of their gender, have other roles assigned to them. These roles of mothers, daughters, and wives are also perceived as part of their nature, as part of who they are. Thus, for males it is considered “natural” that they have power in their society while for females it is considered “natural” that they assume the tasks of the household, but do not generally enjoy any other power or, with a few notable examples like Ruth and Judith, have agency in societal matters beyond the family.

Power is a given for men in the Hebrew Bible. It is there; it is always ready to be taken and used. It is direct and lineal.<sup>68</sup> For women in the biblical accounts power is

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<sup>67</sup> In this section I present a general introduction to the issue of gender in the Hebrew Bible. Once I discuss the biblical stories chosen in this project I will pay close attention to the issue of gender in the Deuteronomistic History, of how men and women interact in the biblical accounts.



normally denied rather than offered. Among women in the biblical records who use unorthodox ways to obtain and exert some power are Tamar, Ruth, and Judith. I believe it is because of the gender distinctions that suppress any exercise of power that women in the Hebrew Bible stories are noticed when they act in nontraditional and unorthodox ways. Since women do not have the recognized, lineal, and legitimate power of men, they are forced to find creative ways of obtaining such power. That is why we have figures of wise, strange, trickster, and foreign women in the Hebrew Bible—women who in some way defy the norms, who subvert expectations. These are women who engage in situations in which they can draw out power, a power that it is not offered. They have to fight or plot to get it, make it their own, and appropriate it. The wise, the trickster, the foreign women, and other characters in the biblical accounts know that if they want to get something for themselves, if they want to survive even, they have to play the gender game of their society.

Women have to find solutions to their situation by working around the rules that the system and society have established. The types of actions they take are therefore not lineal like that of males. They are more difficult carry out and require a great deal of courage, wisdom, cleverness, even seduction on the woman's part. These creative ways of getting what they need break all types of gender expectations. Women are left using what they have at their disposal (their wisdom, their bodies, and their words) to survive and get the power they need.

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<sup>68</sup> In this chapter I seek to show the differences between men and female powers in the ancient Israelite society. In researching for this chapter I found it very interesting that Hebrew Bible scholars do not address gender as a separate category, but as one among many intermingled aspects in their analysis of biblical passages.

Gender is not the only component that affects the power women and men either have or do not have in the biblical records. Authority, which is related to power and social status, also plays an important role in the ways women participate in societal activities.<sup>69</sup> Authority takes different forms in different societies and then differs, too, among women and men. Women's authority is more limited. The birth of females into an ancient Israelite family is perceived as something negative or disgraceful, because as adults they do not have the privilege of passing on to future generations the family name as males do. Female daughters are subject to the authority of their fathers until they marry. Upon their marriage they become subject to the husband and his household. Women who marry gain some authority by becoming mothers. By having a child the society automatically grants them respect and value. Their value, however, does not rely on who they are as human beings in the first place but rather comes to them because they are able to procreate and in that way perpetuate the husband's family line. Those women who bear male children are more highly recognized by society than those who bear daughters. For unmarried women getting respect and authority from society was difficult or impossible. Prostitutes, widows, foreigners, barren women, and those who functioned as diviners at small shrines were ostracized by the society and given little respect.

Men moved more freely in ancient Israelite society without having to be concerned about restrictions because of their gender. Men occupied ruling positions in the society. The leaders or elders of the cities were always in charge of the decision-making process of each town, watching for the law to be fulfilled and judging the people

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<sup>69</sup> The social status of women in ancient Israel is a theme I develop more fully in the following section.

(Ruth 4:11-12). In the palace men with rank<sup>70</sup> were ones with the authority to determine the future of the nation. Although the king made decisions on societal matters, he certainly had other males along with him advising and supporting him in the political and social affairs of the nation. Prophets were another group of males who worked at the palace and the temple announcing God's will for the nation, denouncing in God's name the situations and conflicts of the nations as well as announcing possible alternatives as a solution. Along with prophets were priests, who had a great deal of authority and power in society. Priests watched to see that the law was fulfilled and also perpetuated religious traditions over many generations. Furthermore, they had power and claimed a direct connection with God as mediators between Yahweh and the people, a position which automatically located them in a superior and privileged position.

Males, then, in Israelite society were the political, social, economic, and religious holders of power and its gatekeepers. Whether they were kings, prophets, priests, or the owners of small businesses, elders or those who were the *pater familias* of a family, they were privileged with many degrees of participation and authority in society. Most women, on the other hand, were left with the tasks of the household and sometimes the field. For those women who were unmarried or independent, alternatives were even more

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<sup>70</sup> Eunuchs were another group of males that lived in the palace. Although they do not seem to have participated in making decisions on societal matters, they did have certain power, such as keeping order in the women's harem of the palace. The fact that they were castrated enabled them to have a better control over this group of women without being a sexual threat to anyone in the palace.

limited. They either lived as prostitutes or wandered around the town hoping for people's charity, as in the case of widows, foreigners, and orphans.<sup>71</sup>

Given this difference in power, authority, and social status between men and women, it is not unexpected that they deal with issues of survival quite differently. The simple fact that women and men had unequal access to power affected the ways each survived or thrived in Israelite society. Therefore, when looking at issues of survival, rather than focusing on how people survive within social organizations, institutions, and cultures, it is important to pay attention to how they survive at a more specific and personal level, that of gender and their own specific circumstances and actions. I believe that examining elements that illustrate the specific realities of people's lives will give me deeper insights to understand their struggles for survival. Women, with their limited resources, live in a less static and coherent reality, always dynamic and subject to change, no matter the historical period.<sup>72</sup>

The discussion on gender, authority, and power in the Hebrew Bible as described above is shaped and determined by the authority of the biblical text. There is a traditional understanding that the passages of the Bible in general, but mainly the Hebrew Bible, reflect a misogynistic view not only of the culture of ancient Israel, but also of the perspectives of their male writers and editors. This is a problem for feminist biblical scholars who do not accept this view and at the same time struggle to find solutions or

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<sup>71</sup> I am aware that there are exceptions to the rule and one has to look at individual cases in different historical periods. The scenario described here intends to offer a general picture of the Israelite society.

<sup>72</sup> Survival is the main focus of my attention in this project. Therefore, the examination of gender here discussed will be connected to the issue of gender and how men and women survive in the Hebrew Bible.

ways to approach the issue. In her introduction to *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*,<sup>73</sup> Peggy L. Day attempts to find strategies to address “gender-nuanced questions” in the Hebrew Bible. To this end, she, like other biblical scholars, uses methodologies from other fields--sociology, anthropology, psychology, literary criticism, history, classics, folklore studies and especially women’s studies.<sup>74</sup> The goal of her volume of essays is to apply and adapt those methodologies to the field of biblical studies. In so doing, the writers of her book hope that by addressing the “gender-nuanced questions” in the biblical accounts they will redefine the issue of biblical authority.

The issue of biblical authority is an especially problematic one for feminist scholars and any person who takes this issue seriously. How do we deal with an ancient text that is primarily andocentric? How do we decide whether or not a text is normative because of the way in which it portrays women or denies women’s experience? What makes a text function as the word of God? Biblical scholars have found some answers to these questions by looking at feminist tenets. As Day describes, feminists have decided that when a text portrays women in the Hebrew Bible in a negative way or denies their experiences as valuable, those texts are not normative for them. Such texts are not sacred. They do not contain the revelation of God and therefore are dismissed.

Biblical scholars take from feminist studies the importance of the dialectic relationship between tradition and experience. For centuries the biblical texts have been shaped, reshaped, and then reshaped again by redactors to make them meaningful to new contexts. This process has been carried on so as to be consistent with a worldwide

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<sup>73</sup> Peggy L. Day, (ed), *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

interpretation. Feminist scholars point out that the process of dialectic relationship between text and tradition preserved the experience of the male audience, and it has therefore preserved male authority.<sup>75</sup> Thus, it will be right and not surprising to conclude that the field of biblical interpretation has been dominated in past centuries by a male audience and has primarily served male interests. Feminist scholars and those who are interested in questioning gender in the Hebrew Bible not only have to struggle with andocentric texts, but also have to deal with a field of studies that has been mainly dominated by males. This does not mean that women biblical scholars were or are not allowed to make their contributions to the field, but that their experiences have certainly been different from and more limited than those of males.<sup>76</sup>

With the help of other fields like sociology, feminist biblical scholars see that asymmetry questions deriving from gender roles are socially constructed and that therefore there is a need to demystify the social factors that produce and perpetuate such asymmetry of gender in ancient Israel.<sup>77</sup> Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes are among the scholars who have “demystified” gender asymmetry in the biblical texts. Instead of following a sociological approach, Brenner and Van Dijk-Hemmes have looked at the fabric of the ancient accounts arguing that there are biblical texts or entire books (such as Proverbs) in the Hebrew Bible where the speaker is a

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>76</sup> It is not surprising that there are few women biblical scholars in comparison to men as well as female doctoral students in the field in comparisons with their male counterparts. Of course I am aware that there are also other reasons why women and men are not equally engaged in academic studies.

<sup>77</sup> Day, *Gender and Difference*, 4.

female voice.<sup>78</sup> This approach is groundbreaking because it challenges the established assumptions of those biblical studies that have supported male authorship of the Hebrew Bible. The gender question is, then, an ongoing topic approached by different scholars in different ways. It is still an unresolved question for me to know how women and men related to each other in ancient Israel. The biblical records along with archeological resources reveal some insights about such complex relationships.

### Status of Men and Women in Ancient Israel

To talk about the status of a group of people in any given society is a difficult task. Discussing women as a social group is no exception. The difficulty lies in the nature of the concept of status itself. Sociologist Sheila Ryan Johansson offers helpful remarks on the ways in which the “status” of women is usually understood and employed. She points out that “‘status’ is used as if it were a perfectly self-evident concept. Most explanations of the changing status of women seem to assume that one social variable can be both the cause and effect of the overall position of women in a society.”<sup>79</sup> Johansson’s point of view helps us understand the complexities involved when exploring the status of women in ancient or modern societies. To overcome the generalized simplicity often present in the use of the concept she argues that one should pay attention to “status patterns,” that is, the information gathered about the different components of women’s lives. There are different stages of life--infancy, childhood, and youth. Other variants are

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<sup>78</sup> Athalya Brenner and Fokkeliën Van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993).

<sup>79</sup> Sheila Ryan Johansson, “‘Herstory’ as History?,” in ?” In *Liberating Women’s History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 405-406.

work, marriage, motherhood, and conditions of being widowed, divorced, and unmarried women. Women's legal rights, religion, political, and military factors are other important components in defining women's status. Still others to be considered as well are cultural and intellectual variables, miscellaneous social variables, and subjective perceptions of status.<sup>80</sup>

Johansson's perspective helps us see that there is no defined, concrete category called status. Status is constituted by a large picture with different variables. Although Johansson's invitation to examine the "status patterns" of women is helpful, this model cannot be applied literally to an examination of women's status in ancient Israel, which is the main goal of this section.<sup>81</sup> Indeed some factors interfere in an analysis of "status patterns" of women in ancient Israel. The first is the limited amount of information about women's lives in this ancient context, like keeping records or legal or civil documents (e.g. marriage contracts, bills of sale, or other transactions) or a tradition of writing on clay tablets or any other form of writing.<sup>82</sup> The Hebrew Bible and the use of extra-biblical materials provided by archeology are the only resources that can shed some light on what may have been the status of women in ancient Israel.<sup>83</sup> By examining the biblical

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> I am aware that the scope of this topic is very broad and impossible to cover in a limited space. The question about the status of women in ancient Israel demands a more exhaustive study of the issue than what will be presented here. In my analysis of the stories of Rahab, Jephthah's daughter and Jael I will explore in detail their respective positions like prostitutes, virgin daughters, and foreign married women.

<sup>82</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Gender and Its Image: Women in the Bible," in *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 118-119.



stories we can also approach the possible roles of women depending on who they were (e.g., mothers, widows, divorced women, daughters, prostitutes).

Using the Bible as the primary resource to learn about the position of women in ancient Israel brings with it assumptions of its own. The information we find in the Hebrew Bible, as in any other document that presents a picture of the reality of a given society, also depicts the biases of its authors. Therefore, in our view the Bible is both an ideological and historical document. It records events that assisting in reconstructing the history of the lives of ancient people in Israel, but it also presents these stories with the corresponding biases of the author, editor, and whoever else had power over the composition of the written material. The stories we read in the Hebrew Bible should not be taken at face value, but rather should be investigated, questioned, and challenged with this ideological awareness in mind. For example, generally speaking biblical writings reflect perspectives of the elite and not of the lower classes.

One way of analyzing the variants that constitute and shape women's status is by exploring the Israelite family. The household is one of the main places of women's activities in ancient Israel. It is there that relationships among women and other members of the family are established. By exploring these interactions one can arrive at some conclusions regarding women's role at home and in the family and also of their positions in society. That women expressed themselves more fully in the private sphere of the household does not mean that they did not participate to some degree in activities of the public sphere.<sup>84</sup> From biblical records one can infer that not all women in ancient Israel

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<sup>83</sup> Carol Meyers, "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33-43.

understood the household as the only place that defined them in society and in regard to other people. There were women who engaged in public affairs or commerce (Prov 31) and others that seemed to own their own property or were considered prostitutes (Josh 2).<sup>85</sup> Here I explore the many venues that informed in some ways the lives and roles of women. Here, too, I look at the large picture of women in ancient Israel, highlighting the different roles they assumed in their society from the time prior to the establishment of the monarchy, during the monarchy, and on to exilic and post-exilic times. As Meyers notes, the work of exploring the lives of Israelite women starts with the Iron Age I Period,<sup>86</sup> which is considered ancient Israel's formative period. It is in this early stage that the patterns of gender relationships along with other aspects of ancient Israelite life were formed. Despite the many political and social changes in Israelite life with the monarchic rule era (Iron II Period), many of these patterns remained established in Israelite society in later generations.

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<sup>84</sup>See also the articles by Leo G. Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish Family: Summary and Conclusions, in Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp [*et al*], *Families in Ancient Israel* (Louisville, Westminster John Know Press, 1997), 163-222; and Leo G. Perdue, "The Household, Old Testament Theology, and Contemporary Hermeneutics," in *Families in Ancient Israel*, 223-257.

<sup>85</sup> Here it is important to remember that the distinction between public and private spheres is always an ambiguous one that gets to be defined and re-defined by societies.

<sup>86</sup> Here I follow Meyers's classifications of the different archeological terms that are used to define the origins of Israel. Iron I period would be between 1200-1000 BCE. This period covers approximately two centuries that occurred between the time of Moses and the foundation of the monarchy. This is the period of the ruling of the Judges. Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 15.

## The Israelite Family

Broadly speaking, women's status was mainly defined by their relationship with the males of their families (e.g., father, husbands, brothers, sons, or any other kinsmen). There were exceptions; some women may have had an independent status (such as prostitutes), but generally speaking the family in all periods of Israelite life was the male-headed *bet 'ab* (the house of the father). The family line and the transmission of property and patrimonial land normally were passed from males to males. This social structure of transmission of male property and inheritance was known as patrilineal.<sup>87</sup> Another social structure is named patrilocal, women joining the household of their husbands.<sup>88</sup> In the patrilineal social structure women were considered aliens or transitory, either in their own family or the family of their future husbands. Daughters were prepared from birth to abandon the house of their fathers and join the husband's residence where they were generally considered outsiders in their husband's (or the son's) households.<sup>89</sup>

Another feature of the patrilineal social structure is endogamy (marriage within the same tribe or clan), preferred in some periods of ancient Israel, because it kept the boundaries of a family or clan closed without the inclusion of an "alien" or "foreign" wife. Foreign wives were considered a threat to the family of the husband. According to Bird, the main assumption behind this fear is that the foreign woman will maintain her

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<sup>87</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, "Women (Old Testament)," in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 52-66.

<sup>88</sup> Toni Craven, "Women as Teachers of Torah in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books," in *Passion, Vitality, and Foment: The Dynamics of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Lamontte M. Luker (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 277.

<sup>89</sup> Bird, "Women (Old Testament)," 55.

own religion and disparage the religion and nation of her new family.<sup>90</sup> This is based on the narrative assumption of D and the Chronicler. Some scholars have wondered whether sociologically and economically there was a more pressing reason, such as not sharing power with non-Israelites.<sup>91</sup> Other warnings against foreign wives are related to the influence women were thought to exert over their husbands because of the freedom and power they may have had within the family, even though the society was patriarchal (Judg 14:17; 1 Kgs 1:15-21). Moreover, women as mothers were feared, because they might transmit non-traditional values to their children through their religious and social teachings.<sup>92</sup>

Another result of the patrilineal structure was that women usually did not inherit the land. There were exceptions, for example, of daughters functioning as placeholders in the absence of sons until they grew up and were able to inherit the land and continue the legacy that the father had left (Num 27:1-11). In other cases, the daughters were required to marry within the father's family to continue the male line (Num 36: 6-9). Finally, the levirate law was another practice that helped to secure the patrimony of the family. This law stipulated that a man customarily married the wife of his deceased brother and that the children born from this union would continue the brother's "name" (Gen 38:8). The levirate practice also included marrying a close kinsman (Ruth 2:20; 4:5-6).<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. In my opinion another reason for sustaining the practice of endogamy is economics. Keeping the marriage among the same people from a same tribe or clan was a way of keeping the economic means and resources of that family together without having to share anything with an outsider or "alien." In this way the family is protected from any danger that may occur through the introduction of a stranger or alien into the household.

<sup>91</sup> Personal conversation with Dr. Leo G. Perdue. February 23, 2008.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 59.

The family was the main unit of ancient Israelite society, and the one that provided the subsistence for life in both the private and the public sphere. Evidences of women's power appear in both pre-monarchic times and also post-monarchic times, varying in different historical periods.

#### Women's Realities in Pre-Monarchic and Monarchy Times<sup>94</sup>

The society of ancient Israel in pre-monarchic times during the Iron I period had unique features. At this time society was organized into tribes. Authority of the societal organization was not exerted from top to bottom, but from the bottom to the top. Others have questioned the univocal claim of equality.<sup>95</sup> In this society the household, not the tribe, constituted the main unit<sup>96</sup> and served as the center of cultural, social, political, and economic expressions of human life.

According to Meyers, many of the archeological excavations found in the Iron I period included only domestic buildings. Other scholars like Mazar think that during the

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> I am aware that in this section I am treating the status of women in different historical periods of Israelite society almost as if they were one. Although I am sure that there are differences in women's status in each of these periods I have had difficulty finding materials that treat women's status according to different historical periods. Thus, the closest solution I have found is to treat women's status—virgin daughters and prostitutes—together. However I will mention the biblical passages where these women appear that in turn reflect the appropriate historical period.

<sup>95</sup> Private conversation with Dr. Leo G. Perdue, February 23, 2008. Also see note 2 in Phyllis Tribble, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>96</sup> Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 139.

Iron I settlements there were many public buildings.<sup>97</sup> The absence of public works (granaries, temples, stables) from this period indicates that most of the cultural and social activities of the society at this time took place in the household.<sup>98</sup> Since survival was the main goal in tribal Israel, every member of the household was involved in one way or another in all activities of production.<sup>99</sup> By looking at the ways in which women and men along with the children of the household interact with each other; one can get some sense of the status of women.

Meyers uses the tools of anthropology and social science to explore gender roles in ancient Israel societies.<sup>100</sup> There are two reasons for biblical scholars to borrow those tools. First, “the usage of social scientific approaches becomes even more compelling, given the dilemma of trying to extract a balanced view of women’s status from a biblical corpus overwhelmingly patriarchal in its stance and scope.”<sup>101</sup> Thus, the fact that we are dealing with a patriarchal body of literature requires from the biblical scholar a dialogue with other disciplines that will provide information not found in the biblical records. Second, Meyers argues that the reason for using materials from other fields derives not

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<sup>97</sup> Amihai Mazar, *Archeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000-86 B.C.E* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>100</sup> Carol Meyers, “Procreation, Production, and Protection: Male-Female Balance in Early Israel,” in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51 (1983): 569-593. In this article Meyers explores three major activities that inform and decide the survival of any group in society: (1) procreation (reproduction), (2) production (subsistence); (3) protection (defense). Meyers understands that “the asymmetry of gender roles arises from the disproportionate amount of energy expended by males and females on these three activities,” 573-74.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 570.

only from the patriarchal nature of the Bible, but also because of the unbalanced picture that the Scriptures present of the relationship between men and women. The biblical record is not only androcentric, it is also unequal in the ways it presents gender relationships.<sup>102</sup>

Women's status changes with the rise of the monarchy by the end of the 11th century BCE and the exilic and post-exilic times. The main influence for this change is the centralization of power. Prior to the rise of Israel there was a more egalitarian and tribal system practiced in early Israel mainly in the rural areas. The main unit of this type of society was the household where women and men mostly shared the important tasks of providing for the family. Despite a patrilineal and patriarchal system, still women participated to some extent in the society of early Israel. As part of the centralization of power with the rise of the monarchy, the freedom people had to produce and to have some agency in their communities disappeared.

The monarchy became hierarchical, ruling the lives of people and making them dependent on the new structures of power. Now military, state, and religious bureaucracies ruled the economy of the society. The power that the family had as the main unit of the society was replaced by the power of the king. The loyalties that were shared among different tribes or clans were now directed to common loyalty to the king and the political system. This new political system overpowered the small ways in which people managed to produce what they needed to survive and to make a profit from the products of their work.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

It is in the midst of this reality that women's and men's status changed drastically, depending on whether they lived in the cities or in the villages. Women in the cities suffered more as a result of the male hierarchy that informed the rising monarchical system. This male domination continued after the dissolution of the monarchy in the exilic and post-exilic times in Israel. In the cities women became less productive as their husbands became more involved in societal activities bringing external resources of existence to the house. Increasingly women's contributions to the household now became limited to reproduction. For the women in the villages, the reality was slightly different or did not change drastically as it did for their counterparts in the cities. Women continued working with the males of the family in the tasks of production and agricultural activities, although such activities gradually became controlled by the monarchy when a change in economy took place. The taxation of the economy was a new feature that people had to face. Taxation became a burden for the rural Israelite family whose main task was the struggle to survive everyday; now they were forced to meet an extra requirement of the state. Such situations brought nothing more than suffering, debt, and poverty to Israelite families, making them less sufficient and less capable of producing the means for their own survival. Others remind us that labor and military service drained families of needed manual labor. Booty could increase wealth, but only if wars were successful.<sup>104</sup>

Another element that influenced the ability of the tribal Israelite family to survive was the emergence of foreign commerce in urban and rural areas, as archeological

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<sup>103</sup> Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 189-190. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First-Temple Judaism," in *Families in Ancient Israel*, 48-104.

<sup>104</sup> Private conversation with Dr. Leo G. Perdue, February 23, 2008.



findings of imported ceramics reveal.<sup>105</sup> The Israelite family that had once enjoyed autonomy in their production and subsistence by the 8th and 7th centuries BCE had become less powerful and more dependent on the state than before. Both females and males suffered the lack of the household as a place of economic, social, and political subservience.<sup>106</sup> With this loss many peasants were forced into wage labor, which automatically located them in a low social status. This is the background that informs some of the biblical records from Deuteronomistic literature that mention the need to protect and provide for the “foreign,” the “poor,” the “orphan,” and the “widow” as the most vulnerable people in the society. People in these social categories along with widows, prostitutes, wise women and others, belonged to a low social status and occupied a less privileged place in the social pyramid of ancient Israel.<sup>107</sup>

The overview of Deuteronomistic History, the exploration of gender issues in the Hebrew Bible, and the analysis of the status of men and women in ancient Israel go hand in hand with an exposition of the methodologies used in this project.

## Methodological Approaches to the Texts

### Reader-Response Approach

Reader-response criticism is an important approach I use in this project because it creates a space where different voices can be heard interchangeably. First, there is my

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>107</sup> For a more detailed explanation on the different classification of women’s status in Israelite society see Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

voice as a Cuban feminist biblical scholar currently living in the USA. Second, there are voices emerging from Cuban narratives and the Cuban context in itself. Third, there are voices from the Hebrew Bible narratives.

Reader-response criticism, like narrative criticism, involves approaches that are part of the umbrella of literary criticism which became fully recognized as a methodology by the 1990s.<sup>108</sup> Reader-response criticism perceives literature as focusing on the reader and his/her world.<sup>109</sup> One scholar that greatly influenced this approach is Stanley Fish.<sup>110</sup> Through his work in new criticism, Fish considers the text, the author, and the reader. He considers the text as the source of meaning. He believes that in the final analysis it is the reader who “makes” literature for he/she resides at the center of the community of discourse, and it is the reader’s subjectivity that is implicit in the art of interpreting literature.<sup>111</sup>

Finally, in reader-response criticism special attention is paid to the author and reader. Since there is no access to the real author and reader, the concepts of the *implied reader* and *implied author* emerge. The implied author and the implied reader are the ones that surface by our analysis of the text. Although the analysis of the reader and author is at the level of the narrative where author and reader remain in the background, I

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<sup>108</sup> Segovia, “And they Began to Speak in Other Tongues,” 6.

<sup>109</sup> Edgar V. McKnight, “Reader-Response Criticism,” *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation 2*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 370-73.

<sup>110</sup> Stanley E. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>111</sup> For an application of DH in narrative criticism see David M. Gunn, “New Directions in the Study of Biblical Hebrew Narrative,” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (1987): 65-75.

believe that beginning to approach reader and author from this level allows other contemporary readers to take part in the process of interpretation and in the search for the different meanings of the text.

### Socio-Historical/ Social-Science Approaches

Socio-scientific criticism as it is used on the Hebrew Bible seeks to reconstruct the social worlds behind these texts (e.g., ancient Israel) while simultaneously illuminating the lives of the people living in these worlds. Model approaches of socio-scientific methods include a variety of disciplines from social sciences (particularly sociology, anthropology, and archaeology) that provide insights to analyze the Bible.

For instance, using 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropological studies, Smith and Wellhausen explained the social phenomena of the Hebrew Bible by establishing a comparison between Israel and pre-Islamic Bedouin Arabs. In so doing, they thought it was possible to "reconstruct the religion and society of ancient Israel."<sup>112</sup> In the field of traditional-historical methods, Martin Noth uses elements of Greek amphictyonies, which propose to "center social organizations on a common religious shrine that is sustained by a tribal confederation."<sup>113</sup> Another historical critical scholar who specializes in form criticism is H. Gunkel. He explores social location of biblical texts in order to understand the social processes that promoted the development from oral tradition to literary production.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites: The Fundamental Institutions* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972); Julius Wellhausen, *Reste Arabischem Heidentums, Gesammelt und Erläutert* (Berlin: De Gruyter & Co, 1927).

<sup>113</sup> For form critical studies see the amphictyony approach of Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

From a sociological analysis of the Hebrew Bible, Max Weber sees evidence supporting his theories of capitalism. Taking a socioeconomic approach to the topic of the reconstruction of Israel, he claims that there are two forms of economy in the Israelite society: semi-nomadic groups and settled agriculturalists.<sup>115</sup> Along with previous scholars' works on socio-historical approaches to the Hebrew Bible, the Marxist perspective of Norman Gottwald argues for a sociological model that focuses on pre-monarchical Israel. For him, the so-called conquest is a "retribalization effort by a peasant population." Since an important element of his Marxist analysis is ideology, Gottwald explores the process by which the oppressed revolted against the oppressor or hierarchical power structures and "retribalized along egalitarian lines."<sup>116</sup>

Included in socio-scientific criticism is work by scholars on other issues such as family, marriage, kingship, the queen mother, and sacred prostitution. The work of Carol Meyers in reconstructing ancient Israel by focusing on the lives of women and their roles in pre-monarchical societies is an important one. Meyers's work provides a framework to understand how the gender relationships operate in ancient Israel, especially during the time prior to the monarchy.<sup>117</sup> Naomi Steinberg<sup>118</sup> provides insights on the topics of

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<sup>114</sup> For form critical studies with emphasis on folklore and oral tradition see the work of Hermann Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond, 1987).

<sup>115</sup> Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (Glencoe, Ill. : The Free Press, 1947); *The Sociology of Religions*, translated by Ephraim Fischhoff (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 3 vols (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968).

<sup>116</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of the Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 BCE* (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 1979).

gender, family, and political organization in the book of Genesis, while Goody's work on cross-cultural studies and kingship offers other perspectives in the field of socio-scientific studies.<sup>119</sup>

## Cultural Studies

Abraham Smith is one of the prominent scholars that have defined cultural studies as “a practice of both cultural critique and cultural intervention.”<sup>120</sup> The cultural critique seeks to question “conjunctural (i.e., historically specific) analyses of all parts of culture to expose their operations of power in the production of identity and in the maintenance of hegemony.” On the other hand, cultural studies as a cultural intervention is expressed within culture in many ways: “through the democratization of culture” and “the creation of collectives to link scholars across disciplines and to connect intellectuals to grassroots organizations, and the production of more liberative forms of pedagogy.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); "Procreation, Production, and Protection: Male-Female Balance in Early Israel," 569-93; "Women and the Domestic Economy of Early Israel," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999). For more on Meyers's ethnoarcheological approach see her work mentioned in footnote 56.

<sup>118</sup> Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>119</sup> Jack Goody, *The Oriental, the Ancient, and the Primitive: Systems of Marriage and the Family in the Pre-industrial Societies of Eurasia* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>120</sup> Abraham Smith, "Cultural Studies," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation 1*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 236-38.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

In the field of biblical studies the two aforementioned concepts consider the role of context as valuable resources for “biblical readings strategies, interpretation practices and evaluation standards.”<sup>122</sup> As a form of cultural intervention, the method is used in biblical studies to reclaim “the residual or lost voices refracted through biblical texts...”<sup>123</sup>

Fernando Segovia has worked intensively on cultural studies. In his article “Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as a Mode of Discourse,”<sup>124</sup> he explains how historical criticism (especially beginning with the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), literary criticism, and [socio] cultural criticism (mid-1970s and mid-1990s) have influenced cultural studies. Segovia mentions the elements that are part of the method of cultural studies. A central figure that emerges or is rediscovered in this method is the real reader, whom he also calls a “flesh-and-blood reader.”

Segovia articulates the specificities of cultural studies. He analyses the methodology that cultural studies follow, integrating historical, theoretical formalist, and socio-cultural questions of other methods in connection with the reader. Thus, the reader is always at the center of any reflection. It is important, too, that the location of meaning does not lie in an isolated text but in the encounter that emerges from the interaction between reader and text.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, “Cultural Studies and Contemporary Biblical Criticism: Ideological Criticism as a Mode of Discourse,” in *Reading from this Place*, vol. 2 Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 2-17.

Segovia also discusses the ways in which a text is seen in cultural studies. Texts, he says, can be seen as *medium*, *mean*, and *construct*. These ways of seeing not only the text but also the reader allow the audience to be aware of the openness of this method. Cultural studies is not a rigid but a dynamic method open to accept readings and meanings that arise from many places and social locations. Thus, it can be said that this is a holistic method that combines many perspectives and paradigms but remains open to the reading strategies that flesh-and-blood readers bring to the text.<sup>125</sup>

One of the reading strategies to which I pay particular attention in this project is determining the parallels that may exist between my own culture as a Cuban feminist living in the USA and the different cultures of the Hebrew Bible narratives I discuss here. In those narratives, just as in contemporary contexts, there are tensions and analogies that can be drawn among them.

### Postcolonial Approach

According to biblical scholar Musa Dube, postcolonial biblical interpretation is “an umbrella term that covers a multitude of literary practices and concerns of diverse races, empires, colonies, geographical centers, times, and genres.”<sup>126</sup> Within biblical

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 2,3.

<sup>126</sup> Musa W. Dube Shomanah, “Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation,” *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* 2, 299-303. For more on postcolonial biblical interpretation see the works of Fernando F. Segovia. *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 2000); "Interpreting Beyond Borders: Postcolonial Studies and Diasporic Studies in Biblical Criticism" in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). Also see the works of Rasiah. S. Sugirtharajah (ed), *The Postcolonial Bible: A Reader* (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2006); *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 1991).

studies the categories of the colonizer and the colonized that are part of this method can be divided into reading and writing communities: colonizers, settler colonizers, indigenous or natives of settler colonies, oppositional decolonizers, and immigrants who live in former colonizer centers or places.

Postcolonial readings are important, because they challenge the perspectives of those located in centers of power (the so-called metropolises). These types of readings deconstruct any interpretation of the Bible that privileges the oppressor over the oppressed. Postcolonial biblical interpretation looks for ways of reading texts from the place of the colonized, through the eyes of those who have lived on the side of the oppressed, at the margins of the society's social power. Postcolonial reading also deconstructs any power associated with any empire, either as an empire found in the biblical world or in contemporary society. It does so especially by challenging the metanarratives composed by the center for interpreting the empire. For instance, I examine the story of Rahab through the lens of postcolonial criticism along with feminist and postmodern lenses. I am aware that these two hermeneutical approaches are often used by postcolonial critics.<sup>127</sup> In this approach I look at the dynamics that exist between the colonizer/colonized--whose characters can be seen as those in power (the spies/Joshua) and those who have less power ascribed to them (Rahab).

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<sup>127</sup> I appreciate Dr. Perdue's comments on this regard. (February 23, 2008).



## Gender and Feminist Approaches

Much has been written about feminism and its history.<sup>128</sup> Much has also been said about the different venues in which feminism and gender approaches are seen within the field of biblical studies. Matters become even more complicated when, within the big umbrella of feminism, women biblical scholars and theologians feel the need to name the specificities of their feminist approach, i. e., those aspects that distinguish them from other groups (i.e., Womanist biblical interpretation and Mujerista theology, among others).

I applaud the diversity within feminist groups and recognize the guiding principle that lies behind feminist and gender approaches: a concern for taking into consideration women's issues as critical to the sociological, historical, and literary interpretation of texts. This means in my case assessing the lives of women and men in ancient Israel and the interactions that take place between them. Of course, concern for taking a stand on women's issues as well as giving voice to their struggles and acknowledging their presence and role in the biblical accounts is not enough. As a feminist biblical scholar I am also committed to being aware always of such issues in contemporary societies. Thus,

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<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible* (New York: European Publishing Company, 1895); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) See some of the works by Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992); *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology; Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983); *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon and Schuster 1974). See the works by Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins; Searching the Scriptures*, 2. Vols (New York : Crossroad, 1993).

my biblical discourse as well as my daily life is guided and shaped by a commitment to feminism.

It was Elizabeth Cady Stanton in *The Woman's Bible* who was one of the first to reinterpret from a feminist perspective biblical passages seen as problematic for women, that undermined them and made them inferior to men like the story of Adam and Eve in the garden. In the 20th century the civil rights movement shaped the work of feminist biblical interpretation. Works like *The Feminine Mystique*, *Women and Religion*, *Women in the World of Religion*, and *Religion and Sexism* provided different angles from which to discuss issues related to feminism and to rename and reclaim women's roles in societies. In the 1960s, the work of Mary Daly moved from a reformist perspective—the idea that the Bible and the religious communities could be purged of their bias against women—to a revolutionary approach that is concerned with the search for women's self-identity along with a new naming of the self and the divine derived from women's experience.<sup>129</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether's method of correlation, which includes the view of “a canon within the canon,” constitutes a touchstone by which a variety of texts in Scripture may be evaluated.

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposes four hermeneutical tasks: (1) a hermeneutics of suspicion; (2) a hermeneutics of historical interpretation and reconstruction; (3) a hermeneutics of ethical and theological evaluation; and (4) a hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization. Finally, there are the works of

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<sup>129</sup> Daly, *Beyond God the Father*.

feminist biblical scholars from Latin America (Elsa Tamez),<sup>130</sup> South Africa (Mercy Amba Oduyoye),<sup>131</sup> Hispanics in the US (Ada-Maria Isasi-Díaz),<sup>132</sup> Asian-American (Kwok Pui Lan),<sup>133</sup> and many others who voice the specific elements that shape their readings based on their own social location.

### Postmodern Approach

To speak about postmodernism is a complicated task since there are so many definitions, perspectives, and works on this topic.<sup>134</sup> Postmodernism is considered an approach, method, or discipline that has influenced studies on philosophy, English literature, and other fields in the 20th and 21st centuries. Some scholars in biblical studies also use this method that, although not new to the field, poses challenges to various methodologies of biblical interpretation (i.e. historical, rhetorical, literary criticism). I

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<sup>130</sup> Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1982); *Through the Eyes: Women's Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989).

<sup>131</sup> M.A. Oduyoye and M.R.A. Kanyoro (eds), *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition, and the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1992).

<sup>132</sup> Isasi-Díaz *La Lucha Continues; Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*.

<sup>133</sup> Pui Lan Kowk, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995); *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000); *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

<sup>134</sup> For a diverse and comprehensive bibliography on postmodernism as well as for a synthesis of its development in history see A.K.M. Adams, "Post-Modern Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. vol. 2, 305-309. For a full explanation of tenets of postmodernism see Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 239-266.

think postmodern biblical interpretations struggle to be accepted by other methodologies in biblical studies because the nature of this approach is precisely to question, challenge, and deconstruct methodologies that purport to look at the biblical text objectively and yet are closed to seeking multiple meanings or perspectives (e.g. post-colonial, Latino, and Asian American issues). Postmodern biblical interpretation invites readers to be part of the process of interpretation of the text allowing them to bring their own social location and subjectivity to their reading. Considering the reader's viewpoint as a key component in the interpretative process of the text is not something considered by traditional biblical methodologies.

Postmodern biblical interpretation goes beyond including the readers, their perspectives, and questions in the process of interpreting the text; it also challenges the place from which the reading of the text emerges. In this methodology, biblical interpretations that universalize their perspectives are disregarded. Instead, readings that emerge from the margin and allow multiple voices to be heard occupy a special place. Methods like postcolonial biblical interpretation and deconstruction help readers to promote their readings originating from the periphery and to deconstruct those traditional readings that have up to now occupied the center in biblical studies.

The main objective of postmodernism is to deconstruct power.<sup>135</sup> Postmodernism challenges the power dynamics present in traditional methodologies of any fields that insist on their perspectives as the ultimate and universal truth and thus exclude

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<sup>135</sup> For a more comprehensive analysis on the category of power, which in turn is also related to postmodern thought see the works of Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980); *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); and *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

marginalized voices from their discourses. The beauty in deconstructing all forms of power is that new spaces may be created by all readers to reinvent ways of perceiving reality and to interpret texts following their own social locations or perspectives. In this dissertation I will use the essence of postmodern approaches by deconstructing the center/periphery dualism that I encounter in the biblical texts. This postmodern lens will allow me to see different characters' interactions and offer insights for meaningful and more egalitarian relations and opportunities for people surviving in Cuba today. In order to arrive at an understanding of relationships among the characters of the Hebrew narratives and consequently the lives of Cubans today it is necessary to scrutinize the narratives of Joshua and Judges chosen for this project from the corpus of the Deuteronomistic History (DH).

### Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism may appear as a new methodology in biblical studies,<sup>136</sup> but in reality this method like other methodologies (e.g. structuralism, rhetorical criticism, and reader-response criticism) has previously been developed within the field of literary studies under the name of literary criticism.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> For more on the literary treatment in biblical studies see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, Ind. : Indiana University Press, 1987); David J.A. Clines and Cheryl J. Exum, *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield : JSOT Press, 1993).

<sup>137</sup> Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ. : Princeton University Press, 1957); Fran Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979); Robert E. Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968).

Narrative criticism pays attention to the literary features of the biblical passage.<sup>138</sup> The intention of this method is to unveil the story aspects presented in the narrative. In doing this, one is better able to interpret the text as well as to disregard those interpretations that do not mesh with the purpose of the story. In narrative criticism the text has an intrinsic, almost sacred value. This method tries to see the story as a whole, and it analyzes the story as such. The analysis made in narrative criticism looks for integrity in the literary form of the passage at hand, in the historical reality present behind the story, and in the agenda the reader has when interpreting the text. Thus, the main focus of this method is the attempt to look at the literary features of the narrative, which in turn will disclose an interpretative center.<sup>139</sup>

One of the main advantages of narrative criticism is that it pays attention to the text and its expression.<sup>140</sup> In other words, it deals with what we have at hand. This allows the reader to concentrate on discovering the dynamics of the story as it is presented in the text. A second advantage is that narrative criticism sees the text in a constructive way. Although it acknowledges that a text has internal contradictions, this method tries to consider the text as a whole and not to deconstruct it. While deconstructive criticism takes the story apart, narrative criticism always defends the form of the narrative as a

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<sup>138</sup> Richard G. Bowman, "Narrative Criticism," 17-44.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Narrative criticism is a discipline that has gained relevance both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. For some works on using narrative criticism in the New Testament see David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Ronald Michie, (eds), *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999); also by David Rhoads, *Reading Mark, Engaging the Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004).

whole and reads the text holding all its elements together. In this project narrative criticism and my hermeneutics of survival (*resolviendo*) become the main methodologies I use to analyze the biblical passages while deconstruction and other hermeneutical approaches are less used in my readings of the texts.

Narrative criticism involves a particular analysis of a different kind of rhetoric than the one examined in other methods. For instance, in literary criticism, the rhetorical elements considered are the literary elements – for example, tropes -- that are part of the text. In narrative criticism, on the other hand, the rhetorical elements analyzed are those used to construct a narrative: plot, characters, and other elements used to narrate, to tell, to represent with words something that has happened.<sup>141</sup> Here I look at character, plot, point of view, narrator, etc., because it allows me to access the story from different angles, listening to different voices.

#### Elements of Narrative Criticism: Plot, Character, Time and Space

##### Plot

Plot “is the organizing force or principle through which the narrative meaning is communicated.”<sup>142</sup> The plot is the ground plan, the blueprint of the story, or as Bar-Efrat indicates, the body of the story providing “a beginning, middle and an end to the end of the course of the action.”<sup>143</sup> Other scholars like Fokkelman see the plot as an entity that provides “the head and the tail we need to hold on to, and thus determines the boundaries

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Gunn and Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 101.

<sup>143</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 93.

of the story as a meaningful whole.”<sup>144</sup> Inside this structure of the plot that provides a beginning and end of the story are details that should be taken into consideration. One of these details is that in the story’s narrative or development arc there is an ascending curve that reaches a climax before descending to its resolution. There are other patterns in the plot of the story, for example, quick turns or changes in direction in the action that mark a shift in the development of the plot.<sup>145</sup>

The plot is constituted by an intentionally interconnected sequence of events.<sup>146</sup> Thus, the plot of a story, it can be said, is a conscious construction done by the writer or narrator or whoever assumes the task of weaving the story. Finally, a plot that has been carefully constructed accomplishes the goal of arousing the reader’s interest and emotional involvement in the story and it also has the ability of filling with meaning the events that take place in the story.

#### Narrator

In narrative criticism the narrator is one of the most important features of the story because, as Fokkelman says, the narrator is the master of ceremonies guiding the story and the reader.<sup>147</sup> He is the one who directs the course of the story and he is in charge of the plot, the storyline.<sup>148</sup> He decides when the characters appear in the story and when

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 76, 77.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 55.



they disappear from it. The narrator controls the time and the space of the narrative. He chooses where and how the events take place, as well as the frequency with which events happen.

The narrator can be considered as omniscient. He knows everything that happens in the story and also knows secrets not known by everyone in the story. He knows what the characters think or feel and he transmits those thoughts and feelings to the readers.<sup>149</sup> The narrator can be seen as omnipresent. He has the freedom to be part of the events that take place in the story. Sometimes he appears along with all the characters in some or in all the scenes of the story. He also can disappear from the story or appear in certain scenes with some but not all the characters. The narrator is, in a certain way, another character.<sup>150</sup> He is the character who tells the story while the other characters perform it.<sup>151</sup> His voice and points of views are present throughout the story most of the time in first person.

According to Gunn and Fewell there are three elements to consider when analyzing the role of the narrator: reliability, description, and evaluation. A reliable narrator is someone who can be trusted, who does not make mistakes, give false information, or intentionally mislead. There are two particular kinds of information that

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid. I agree with Fokkelman's clarification about the gender of the narrator when he says that it is possible but difficult to conceive that the biblical author may be female. Although he does not give much significance to this detail, he leaves open the possibility of imagining a female narrator.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 17.

<sup>150</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 53.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

the narrator provides: he relates the characters' actions and informs the reader about the characters' feelings. What the narrator relates about the characters is all that the reader knows. The ways in which he delineates the information influences what the reader infers about the story. The narrator describes what happens in the story offering short descriptions of places, people, and actions, or giving extensive details about the story and offering information that might not be relevant or is excessive or unnecessary.<sup>152</sup>

The narrator also evaluates what happens in the story and the characters' behaviors. There are occasions when these judgments are very present and others when he does not involve himself much in the plot of the story. Sometimes he offers only brief details, comments, or a simple word.<sup>153</sup> The narrator, then, is a figure who plays many roles in biblical narratives. He is in charge of every single detail of the narrative, of telling the story, of describing events and people, of judging whatever happens.

## Characters

Characters are the embodiment of a narrative. As readers the only way we have to know what happens in the story-- the how and why-- is through the actions and fate of the characters, including the narrator, who is a character too. Through the characters we know the present context of the story, but we also learn about the past events of the narrative. Through the characters' actions and the decisions they make when they are

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 59. Here they mention an example of how the narrator makes judgments. In Gen. 6:9, for instance, the narrator offers an evaluation about Noah. He mentions that "Noah was a righteous man; blameless he was in his generation; Noah walked with God."

confronted with specific situations we can conclude what the ethical dimensions of the story are.

Characters also have the capacity of transmitting the values of the narrative to the reader. As readers we feel attracted to their personalities and histories. They awake different feelings in us. We can identify with their suffering, rejoice with their happiness, or feel repulsion if their actions provoke such feeling in us.<sup>154</sup> One detail that Bar-Efrat reminds us of is that when we are exploring biblical characters whose existence may or may not be real it is more difficult to have access to their authentic personality. All that we know is what the narrator tells us and from what is told we can conclude certain features of their personalities, even their ethical values. Nonetheless, we have to be aware that even such a conclusion based on what we know through the narrative does not necessarily represent the entire picture of the characters' personalities. Thus, the process of knowing and judging the characters of a story can be difficult and challenging.<sup>155</sup>

In narrative criticism, characters are classified as round or flat.<sup>156</sup> Flat characters are those whose personalities are simple, who show few qualities, and sometimes move the plot only very slightly.<sup>157</sup> Round characters, on the other hand, are those whose personalities show different nuances and act in more complex ways. Round characters show human feelings such as love, hatred, fear, sadness, or happiness in a more open,

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<sup>154</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 47.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 47,48.

<sup>156</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 65-75

<sup>157</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 75.

dynamic, and complex way than flat characters. Round characters resemble the reader in being complex human beings.<sup>158</sup>

## Time

Time is a feature that plays a crucial role in the development of a narrative. As Bar-Efrat says “a narrative cannot exist without time, to which it has a twofold relationship: it unfolds within time, and time passes within it.”<sup>159</sup> From one perspective, time passes within the narrative, marking the movement of the plot and the actions of the characters. This is called narrated time or internal time. Looked at ~~it~~ from another perspective, time is outside the narrative. This is external or narrative time and it provides the timeline of the plot, the sense of time that moves the plot along and allows the reader to understand what is happening inside the narrative. One can say, I believe, that external or narrative time is how the narrator uses time to move the story from one moment to the next. Internal time or narrated time is time as the characters use and experience it.

## External Time or Narration time

The external time is indicated by words, collocations, and sentences that organize the narrative and show that there is a continuation in the narration time along which the plot moves. The narration time is accomplished through the use of certain words that are temporal expressions and through the use of different verb tenses. Verb tenses, according to Bar-Efrat, play only a small role in marking time. They indicate past, present, and

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Efrat-Bar, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 141.

future actions that take place in the narrative, but they do not let the reader know whether the events took place a long time ago or only a few minutes. Temporal expressions, on the other hand, provide a fuller idea of the external time of the narrative. Nouns, adverbs, prepositions, and particles, which denote certain points in time and periods of time, mark time and define duration.<sup>160</sup> The expressions that indicate duration of time are introduced by particles such as “and,” “so,” “but” “until,” and by ordinal numbers. The expressions denoting points in time clearly mark the point at which the action begins and when it ends. The expressions that indicate points in time often include propositions like “from” and “to.”<sup>161</sup>

#### Internal Time or Narrated Time

According to Bar-Efrat, a story always requires internal time. It is in the internal time “where the characters and the incidents exist in time. Everything that changes during the course of the narrative as well as everything that remains static exists within time.”<sup>162</sup> This narrated time is not uniform or regular. Its directions and speed often change in the narrative. The narrated or internal time expands or contracts depending on circumstances and events. This type of time is not continuous or lineal. Rather, it is subject to jumps, gaps, and delays.<sup>163</sup> The internal time is neither chronological nor demonstrative of

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 145. An example of this denotation of points of time can be seen in Judges 19:25-26. In this passage there is a clear indication that the Levite’s concubine was abused all night long until the morning.

<sup>162</sup> Efrat-Bar, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 141.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 142.

specific divisions between past, present, and future. Narrated or internal time is very useful in the narrative because it helps to change the speed of the narrative by having gaps, or jumps in between episodes, for instance. <sup>164</sup>

## Space

Space or, as Chatman classifies, “verbal story-place,”<sup>165</sup> the one we know in a verbal narrative, is an abstract concept. While films show on a screen the places where events take place, in a written text or narrative such screens do not exist. As readers we are forced to imagine and construct spaces or places from the words and mental projections that the characters and the narrator describe for us.

Space as well as time are elements that provide the narrative with a dimension of reality.<sup>166</sup> In biblical narratives space is mainly shaped through the movements of the characters and the references they make to places. These two elements are usually presented together. We hear about the characters going on a journey and how, as they go along, names of places are mentioned.<sup>167</sup> But space has a large connotation in biblical narrative. As Bar-Efrat indicates, in the biblical narrative there is a strong intention of creating a sense of time, which is achieved “at the expense of the shaping of space.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Two other elements that constitute a subdivision in the category of time are: the duration of time, and the sequence of time. The essence of these two aspects is better explained by looking at a biblical narrative. For some examples on biblical narratives see Efrat-Bar, *Narrative Art*, 143-165.

<sup>165</sup> Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 101.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

Since “space is fundamentally static and unchanging it is an alien element in biblical narrative, based as it is primarily on presenting fluctuations and developments, which is the function of time.”<sup>169</sup> Thus Bar-Efrat recognizes that space is not a developed category in the biblical narrative. Rather it is an element that supports the category of time and its development in the narrative. As this author mentions, here biblical narrative has no desire to linger to enjoy the description of a place, but it is more concerned to move the story forward (time) as a way of following the development of events.<sup>170</sup> This does not mean that space is not an important element in the narrative. I personally have found that in looking at a biblical passage from the narrative perspective where I use the category of space, this element can be very helpful in understanding the actions of the characters and the ways in which such places or spaces reveal their realities and contexts.

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<sup>168</sup> Efrat-Bar, *Narrative Art*, 196.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

## Chapter 2

### Joshua 2: 1-23: The Story of Rahab

#### Summary of the narrative

The story of Rahab has been traditionally interpreted as the account of a foreign woman and low-status prostitute who changes the course of her life when she converts to Yahweh, the God of Moses. In return for her faithful act of saving the spies sent by Joshua to search the land of Canaan, Rahab, along with her family, is saved when her city of Jericho is destroyed.

This story as framed in the book of Joshua is considered part of the Deuteronomistic history (DH).<sup>171</sup> The dominant literary form of Joshua 1-12 is the saga, which recounts the events in the Israelite occupation of Canaan. According to biblical scholar Norman K. Gottwald, “It is clear that most of the sagas in Joshua 2-11, in contrast to the comprehensive DH introduction and summaries are restricted to the locale of the tribe of Benjamin.”<sup>172</sup> The sagas from chapter 2:1-8:29, Gottwald continues, “focus on

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<sup>171</sup> See Chapter One, Pages 4-9 for an explanation of the origin of the Deuteronomistic history (DH) promoted by the German scholar Martin Noth as well as the works of other biblical scholars who succeeded Noth such as D.M. Mayes, Hans-Detlef, Hoffmann, R. Smend, F.M. Cross, and others. See D.M. Mayes, “Deuteronomistic History,” Hans-Detlef, Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung*; R. Smend, “Das Gesetz und die Völker: Ein Beitrag zur Deuteronomistischen Redaktionsgeschichte,” 494-509. and F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*. See also Gene M. Tucker, “The Rahab Saga (Joshua 2): Some Form-Critical and Traditio-Historical Observations,” in *The Use of the Old Testament and other Essays: Studies in Honor of William Franklin Stinespring*, ed. James M. Efrid (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 70.

<sup>172</sup> Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 230-234. Gottwald gives not explanation for his use of the word saga from the German *sage*.



the penetration of the Israelites across the Jordan River and their early conquest of Jericho and Ai.”<sup>173</sup> Thus, the story of Rahab is part of the narratives of events concerning Gilgal and Jericho. Joshua 2 and 6 specifically address the events related to the destruction of Jericho. Such stories circulated orally and independently before becoming part of the collection<sup>174</sup> that the Deuteronomist editor would include in the book of Joshua.

The story of Rahab is also a conquest tale that finds its parallels with the story of Moses and the spies in Num 13.<sup>175</sup> The Book of Joshua tells how 40 years later a new generation of people was determined to conquer the land, this time guided by Joshua. This chapter explores the story of Rahab through the method of narrative criticism, especially examining the features of plot, narrator, characters, time, and space. It investigate whether and why some characters are classified as flat<sup>176</sup>--typically Joshua, the king, the king’s messengers, and God--and some round,<sup>177</sup> --like Rahab and the spies, paying closer attention to the latter. It examines in particular the spies’ status (who they

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<sup>173</sup>Ibid., 234.

<sup>174</sup> Tucker, “The Rahab Saga (Joshua 2),” 70.

<sup>175</sup> Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, “Reading Rahab,” in *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, eds. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 58.

<sup>176</sup> Flat characters are those whose personalities are simple, who show few qualities, and sometimes move the plot very slightly. See Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 75.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid. Round characters are those whose personalities show different nuances and act in more complex ways. Round characters show human feelings such as love, hatred, fear, sadness, or happiness, in a more open, dynamic and complex way than flat characters. Round characters are complicated human beings who resemble the readers for we also are complicated persons.

are, what they do and say, and how they interact with Rahab) as well as Rahab's social status and her actions.

Time (both internal and external) and space play a significant role, because they provide a setting in which the characters of the story display their actions. External time refers mainly to events that move the plot along, while internal time refers to phrases used by the characters that advance the action and the story line. The examination of space moves from larger areas to small ones beginning with the land of Jericho, then the land of Canaan. Within Jericho lie the city wall, the city gate, and Rahab's house. Other important space and places are the roof and window of Rahab's house and the mountains to which the spies escape.

Narrative criticism serves not only as my main methodology in exploring this chapter, but also as the framework for other methodological approaches. I use postcolonial approaches when examining the relationship between Rahab, a Canaanite who is colonized by the Israelites spies and Joshua (the colonizers), and how marginal people like Rahab, living on the periphery of the city wall, find solutions to conflict. As a reader, I position myself on the side of the colonized and the minority to explore the text. It is from the margin that the center is deconstructed and new insights emerge.

My own insight into Rahab's situation uses the Cuban notion of survival and resolver. She finds herself in a limit situation in which the actions she takes may be seen as unconventional, but looking at the features of narrative criticism mentioned above, I see them as creative.

The passage of course has layers of complexities. One of these is Rahab's status as a female prostitute. Was she really a prostitute, a *zônâh*. Or was she perhaps an

independent woman with some wealth who was labeled pejoratively as a prostitute by her society? Another element is Rahab's intention to embrace the God of Joshua. Was her intention genuine or does her theological discourse in verses 9-23 reveal her conversion simply as a tactic that would allow her to survive, *resolver*, along with her family? Was Rahab's act of hiding the spies motivated by a sense of religious commitment to the God of Moses and Joshua or by a primal desire to survive? Can Rahab be considered a trickster figure? These questions arise from my exploration of the Rahab story.

### Prostitution in Ancient Israel

Prostitution has typically been understood as being one of the oldest professions in every society, particularly of urban and specifically patriarchal urban societies. Prostitution is an indicator of unbalanced relationships and distributions of social power and status between genders.<sup>178</sup> This unequal distribution of power is shown in the asymmetry of sexual roles, expectations, and obligations. As Phillips Bird well states, in ancient Israel "female prostitution is an accommodation to the conflicting demands of men for exclusive control of their wives' sexuality and for sexual access to other women. The greater the inaccessibility of women in the society due to restrictions on the wife and the unmarried nubile women, the greater is the need for an institutionally legitimized 'other' woman."<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Phillips A. Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts," in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 100.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

Further, prostitutes have typically been considered as ambivalent, being both desired and rejected by the males of society. A prostitute serves to release the client's sexual energies, yet is censured and shunned by this same client. A prostitute may be what a man desires for himself, but not what he typically wants his own daughter or wife to become. In the end, even if the prostitute is desired, wanted, and sought after, she is still not accepted fully as a person by her society.<sup>180</sup>

Although prostitutes were considered social outcasts in ancient Israel, they were not thought of as outlaws. This double reality meant that on the one hand, they were tolerated and on the other hand, dishonored as members of one and the same community. Thus, in Proverbs 6: 26; 7: 19 one finds exhortations against adultery, considered a crime in ancient Israel, but not against prostitution. Although prostitution was accepted in this context, it does not mean that such practice was approved in the laws of Lev 19:29 and 21:19.<sup>181</sup>

Prostitutes enjoyed the status of free citizens, that is, they were legally protected by the state. Since they were not under the authority of any male in their family, prostitutes had certain legal rights, such as the ability to sign contracts—a privilege shared also by temple slaves and widows without male guardians.<sup>182</sup>

Prostitutes were socially distinguished from “normal” married women by how they dressed and where they lived. In Genesis 38 we find an example of the specific dress

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Grace I. Emmerson, “Women in Ancient Israel,” in *The World of Ancient Israel: Sociological, Anthropological and Political Perspectives*, ed. R.E. Clements. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 387.

<sup>182</sup> Bird, “The Harlot as Heroine,” 100.

code for prostitutes. When Judah goes to Timnah, he does not recognize Tamar because she took off her widow's garment and dressed in a way that makes clear to Judah she is a prostitute, namely, by covering her face with a veil (Gen 38: 14,15). After she has had intercourse with Judah and, according to the text, "has gone on her way," she takes off her veil and puts her widow's garment back again (Gen 38:19).

### *Zônâh in the Hebrew Bible and in the Rahab story*

Prostitution is a phenomenon often mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. In biblical records, it not only describes acts of a woman who charges money for offering sexual favors or *zônâh*, but it is also used metaphorically to indicate the unfaithfulness of God's people who have abandoned their covenant with Yahweh to follow other gods. In such instances, the Hebrew term used to define sacred or cultic prostitution, sacred/consecrated women is *qā dēs̄*.<sup>183</sup> This is the same Hebrew term used to describe Rahab's social status as a woman.

In the Hebrew Bible, the word used for prostitution is *zônâh*, which is a Qal active participle of the root *znh* usually translated as "becoming a prostitute" or "to become promiscuous." There are many biblical passages from the period of the monarchy and later where *zônâh* is used, among them: Lev 21:7, 14; Deut 23:19; 1 Kgs 3:16; Isa 1:21; 23:15, 16; Jer 3:3; 5:7; Ezek 16:30, 31, 33, 35, 41; 23:44; Hos 4:14; Joel 4:3; Mic 1:7; Nah 3:4; Prov 6:26; 7:10; 1 Kgs 22:38; and Prov 23:27; 29:3. Besides these texts, *zônâ* is also used in three narratives from the Pentateuch (Gen 38:1-26) and Deuteronomist History (Jos 2:1-24 and 1 Kgs 3:16-27).

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<sup>183</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, "To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry into an Old testament Metaphor," in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 219-236.

The term *zōnâh* is used in the story of Rahab to describe her as a prostitute. The Hebrew text notes that the spies arrived in the house of a prostitute woman אִשָּׁה זֹנָה whose name is Rahab רַחַב. The basic meaning found in the root of the verb זָנָה *zānâh ZNH* is “to engage in sexual relations outside of or apart from marriage.”<sup>184</sup> *Brown-Driver-Briggs* also understands *zānâh* as “to commit fornication, be a harlot.”<sup>185</sup> In her article “To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor,”<sup>186</sup> Phyllis Bird explores the various connotations of the term *zōnâ* in Ancient Israel and other neighboring cultures. She finds that other languages such as Aramaic, Ethiopic, and Arabic share the general meaning found in the verb *zānâh*.<sup>187</sup> This is more noticeable in the Arabic *zanā* which means to commit adultery, to fornicate, and to be a whore.<sup>188</sup>

As Bird points out, the use of *zānâh* as the general term for extramarital sexual intercourse is limited to women because marriage was the main factor of legal status and obligation. One has to remember that access to women’s sexuality belonged to the husband alone, and that it was therefore inaccessible prior to the marriage and then

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<sup>184</sup> Seth Erlandsson, “*zānâh*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. Vol. 4, eds. Johannes G. Botterweck, and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 99-104.

<sup>185</sup> F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon with an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody; Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 275, referred to from now on as *BDB*. The section on space and how it is used by the spies provides more details regarding the sexual overtones of these Hebrew verbs.

<sup>186</sup> Phyllis A. Bird, “To Play the Harlot,” 219-236.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-222.

<sup>188</sup> Hans Wehr, in J. Milton Cowan, ed., *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, 1961).

restricted to the husband within the marriage bond. Thus, to violate the husband's sexual rights constitutes a serious offense, indicated by the term *N'P* for adultery.<sup>189</sup> As Bird reminds us, "all other instances of sexual intercourse apart from marriage are designated by the term *ZNH*."<sup>190</sup> However, this term does not cover incest or other prohibited sexual relationships, such as homosexuality or bestiality. *ZNH* is used to signify the absence of the marriage union between consenting partners.<sup>191</sup>

Yet *zānâh* not only encompasses the activities related to women that are sexually restricted to their husbands. The term is used to describe the activity of professional prostitutes, women who have no sexual ties to a husband. In this regard, Bird clarifies that while promiscuity of females, either of a daughter or a levirate-obligated widow, offends the males to whom they are related, the prostitute's activity does not affect any man's rights or honor. Thus, the harlot is free of any sanction that may be otherwise imposed on married women, daughters, or the like.<sup>192</sup>

While Bird gives a definition of the usage of *zānâh*, she also points out that there are several problems in determining the exact meaning of the root. Bird mentions semantic and sociological aspects. She states that the "semantic relationship between the verbal and nominal uses of the root is, in fact, complex, affected in part at least by the figurative usage which dominates the Hebrew Bible and invites interchange."<sup>193</sup> There is

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 223.

also an inappropriate sociological analysis of the phenomenon of prostitution. As Bird indicates, while the use of the Hebrew root provides clues to understand Israel's prostitution, such usage is not enough to describe the nature of the institution of prostitution and how it functioned. Thus, it is imperative to pay attention to the sociological and historical aspects of how prostitution operated in Israel. These aspects, and not the etymology, will supply the content of the term *zônâh*.<sup>194</sup>

For our examination, another valuable point that Bird makes is how the prostitute is regarded as “the other” woman. In a society where there is a great inaccessibility to women because of their status as wives or nubile women, prostitutes are more needed. They are legally tolerated by the society for performing a task forbidden to other women, save for wives.<sup>195</sup> It is within this context that Rahab's actions should be understood. Whether she was or was not a prostitute has implications for how we understand the narrative. If she was indeed a prostitute, it is more likely that she was stigmatized by her society as someone working in a less honorable position. She would have been legally accepted by her society to perform sexual services, yet socially rejected by people due to her profession.

The story of Rahab in Jos 2:1-24 presents a picture of a prostitute (*zônâh*) who lives as an independent woman. Rahab is not described only as a prostitute. We also learn that she owns her house, better understood as a brothel (*bêt- 'iššâ zônâh*). The Hebrew indicates that the spies entered (*bêt- 'iššâ zônâh*) the house of a prostitute whose name is Rahab. This shows that Rahab is both a prostitute and an independent woman, for her

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 225.



house is not the house of her father. As a matter of fact, later in the passage Rahab brings her family to her house (presumably from their own house) to be protected from the destruction of Jericho.

The term *zônâh* is interpreted differently by other scholars. Leila Leah Bronner points out that the root of the word *zônâ* is similar to the word *zôn* which transforms Rahab into an innkeeper.<sup>196</sup> D.J. Wiseman points out that *tzônâ* with the *t* in front the word can be translated as barmaid.<sup>197</sup> Taking as their starting point clause 109-111 in Hammurabi's law code, some scholars have tried to interpret the text of Joshua 2 to argue that Rahab was not a prostitute, but a taverner.<sup>198</sup> The Jewish interpreter Josephus also defends the idea that Rahab was an innkeeper.<sup>199</sup> Rahab's own interpretation of her status as a prostitute adds an important layer to the discussion of characters in this chapter.

## Characters' Social Status and Their Relationship

### Joshua, the king, the king's messengers, and God

Joshua is the first character to appear in Chapter 2. He is the leader who continues Moses' command (from the previous chapter) of reaching the land of Jericho. In this text

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<sup>196</sup> Leila Leah Bronner, "Aggadic Attitudes toward Prostitution: Rabbinic Rehabilitation of the Marginalized Woman," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*; Div. C. Thought and literature. Vol. 1. (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1994), 36

<sup>197</sup> D.J. Wiseman, "Rahab of Jericho," in *Tyndale House Bulletin* 14 (1964): 8-11.

<sup>198</sup> Magnus, Ottosson, "Rahab and the Spies," in *Dumu-E2-Dub-Ba-A* (Philadelphia: University Museum, 1989), 425.

<sup>199</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 5, 1. 2.

he continues the mission by sending two men as spies from the town of Shittim to the land of Jericho. Joshua commands the spies to secretly go וַיֵּלְכוּ and see וַיִּרְאוּ the land. His command resembles Moses' in Num 13:1. However, there are several differences between Num 13:1 and the command of this chapter. In the Num text it is God who instructs Moses to send men to spy out the land. In the Joshua text it is Joshua, a human being and not the divine, who commands the two male spies to go and search the land of Jericho. Furthermore, Joshua sends the spies with rather general instructions--to "go" and "see" the land. He does not give the two men precise instructions about how to spy out the land, nor does he give them any guidance on how to get the right information or even how to be sure to take safe roads. This is in contrast to the passage from Num, in which Moses gives precise instructions to the spies whom he sends on a mission. He briefs them regarding the geography and the strategies they should take (Num 13:17-19).<sup>200</sup>

In contrast to Rahab, who is portrayed as a well-rounded character, the king of Jericho and his messengers are flat characters who function as agents in the story.<sup>201</sup> They do not take any crucial action, but they advance the plotline. The king of Jericho is unnamed. He sends his messengers or soldiers to Rahab's house after learning that she has hidden the spies at her place. The messengers follow the king's command of asking Rahab about the spies. She informs the messengers that, indeed, the two spies had been at

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<sup>200</sup> Yair Zakovitch, "Humor and Theology or the Successful Failure of Israelite Intelligence: A Literary Folkloric Approach to Joshua 2," in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. Susan Niditch (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 81.

<sup>201</sup> Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983). 23.

her home, but that they have fled. The messengers leave Rahab's place and continue the search in the mountains where she tells them the spies may be.

God is another character appearing in this story as a flat character.<sup>202</sup> As Gunn and Fewell state, in most biblical stories God reveals one of a few traits—such as being merciful, concerned for justice, steadfast. Nonetheless, such traits are important in the development of the story.<sup>203</sup> God is mentioned by Rahab in her speech to the spies about the mighty deeds of the God Yahweh who freed the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. Such recognition of God's mighty acts portrays an image of God that runs through the book of Joshua where God continues accompanying the Israelites through their journey of leaving Egypt and conquering a new land, in this case the land of Canaan.

#### The spies

The spies are key characters in this story. In v.1 they are first introduced as two men **שְׁנַיִם-אֲנָשִׁים** and as spies **מְרַגְלִים** who followed Joshua's general and imprecise instructions of going to the land of Jericho and searching it. In v.2, the king's messengers refer to them only as men, and later in 6:23 they are mentioned as two young men **הַנְּעָרִים**. In this text the spies, like Joshua, are presented by the narrator as passive or flat characters. Although they do play an important role in advancing the plot of the story, these spies do not show much agency.<sup>204</sup> They follow Joshua's instructions of searching

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<sup>202</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 75.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

the land. Then, once they are in Rahab's house, they do whatever she tells them to do, whether hiding in the mountains or keeping their promise of sparing her family from the destruction of the land. One can say they are presented as fools at the mercy of the woman Rahab, who happens in part to decide their futures. Here one can see how irony plays a role in the narrative. Rahab, who is the one in a position of power rather than the spies, manages to control the fate of the spies who now depend on her not only to obtain the information they need about the city, but also to escape Jericho safely. Finally, they return to Jericho and report to Joshua what they have seen in the land.

The spies followed Joshua's command of searching the land, but at no point was visiting the house of the harlot Rahab indicated in the text as being part of the plan. It is commonly understood that they went to that house because it was a brothel and a place where they would get information about the land. However, at no point does the Hebrew text actually mention that Rahab's place was a brothel. It is spoken of as being the house of a female prostitute *בֵּית־אִשָּׁה זֹנָה* whose name was Rahab *רַחַב*. There is no mention in the passage of Rahab's house being an "establishment" or that there were other working women there.<sup>205</sup> As a matter of fact, the reality could be that these two spies were young men who went to Rahab's house with other intentions in mind.

In this regard Gunn and Fewell suggest that these spies were likely unmarried and part of a restricted community that would not have allowed them to have sexual intercourse prior to marriage. Once they found themselves in a different and foreign land,

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<sup>204</sup> Aaron, Sherwood, "A Leader's Misleading and a Prostitute's Profession: A Re-Examination of Joshua 2," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31. No 1. (2006): 49.

<sup>205</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 117.

it is possible that they wanted to enjoy their temporary independence and so visited a prostitute.<sup>206</sup> Whether sexual intercourse occurs between the spies and Rahab is something we do not know. One thing that is clear is that the Hebrew euphemism that describes the spies' actions with the Qal perfect third person common plural form of the verbs to enter **בָּוֹא**<sup>207</sup> and to lie down **שָׁכַב**<sup>208</sup> in Rahab's house is the same one used to indicate sexual intercourse taking place.

Although the spies occupy an important place in the narrative and certainly interact with Rahab the prostitute, they do not appear as complex characters whose actions and emotions are clearly drawn. They are not necessarily flat characters, but they do not fit the characteristics of round characters either. They act more like agents of the story.<sup>209</sup> They act, but their actions are more likely programmed by Joshua when he sends them to search the land of Jericho.

Once in Rahab's house the spies follow her instructions: they hide in the roof (we assume that Rahab sends them there once the king's messengers arrive). They also promise Rahab that if she keeps quiet about their mission, she and her family will be spared from the destruction of the land. Vv. 17-21 are the only instances when they speak at length. After promising Rahab that they will spare her and her family if she does not disclose their mission, they warn her and specify the conditions of the oath she has made them take. Afterwards the spies follow Rahab's advice about hiding in the mountains for

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> *BDB*, 97.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 23.

three days after the search for them is over. Finally, they return to Joshua and report to him what they have seen in the land, using Rahab's exact words.<sup>210</sup>

## Rahab

Rahab is a round character and the main one of this story as she guides the plot of the narrative. We first learn about her when the spies that Joshua sends to the land of Jericho arrive at the house of a prostitute woman **בֵּית־אִשָּׁה זֹנֶה** named Rahab **רַחַב**. In Athalya Brenner's re-reading of the story she suggests that Rahab has a proper or real name, now forgotten, and that she is known only by her nickname of 'Rahab' which in Hebrew **רַחַב** means the "wide" or "broad" (one).<sup>211</sup> Furthermore, Brenner's recreation of the story of Rahab recalls Carol Meyer's argument that women's names were often deliberately suppressed in the sacred writings so as to make the women less important and less real.<sup>212</sup> Also the name of Rahab is commonly understood to carry sexual overtones and is connected to the fact that she is described as a prostitute. Moreover the Hebrew verbs used to indicate the actions of the spies coming and dwelling at Rahab's house are those often used as euphemisms to describe sexual intercourse.

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<sup>210</sup> Carolyn, Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 27.

<sup>211</sup> Athalya Brenner, "Wide Gaps, Narrow Escapes: I am Known as Rahab, the Broad," in *First Person: Essays in Biblical Autobiography*, ed. Philip R. Davies. (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 47.

<sup>212</sup> Carol Meyers, "Hannah and her Sacrifice: Reclaiming Female Agency," in *Feminist Companion to Samuel-Kings*. The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 5, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 96-99.

To understand Rahab it is imperative to examine her social status and the nuances of her personality. Three important aspects of Rahab's personality define who she is and the ways in which she acts and reacts in the story: she is a woman, a foreigner, and a prostitute. Chapter One explored the role gender plays in the amount of power women had in ancient Israel. Social status also defined women's level of agency. Being a woman in ancient Israel in itself limited her actions and aspirations. Being a woman, a foreigner, and a prostitute limited even more her access to power. Rahab is a Canaanite, a foreign woman living in the Canaanite land of Jericho soon to be destroyed by the Israelite army of Joshua. She becomes a foreigner once her family is spared from death, and she joins the Israelites.

Rahab is not only foreign among the Israelites; she is also foreign in her own land of Jericho. She lives by the city wall of Jericho, which metaphorically locates her as an outsider in her own community, among her own people. At the same time, she remains an insider because even though on the social periphery, she still belongs to the town of Jericho. This situation creates a tension within Rahab who, on the one hand, may wish to stay faithful to her country and people, yet on the other hand needs to save herself and her family from the upcoming destruction. Her location as both insider and outsider gives her a particular autonomy to move freely in her own land, to be at the center of her community participating in whatever takes place there and yet at the same time remain by the wall of the city, at the periphery of society. Thus, Rahab moves between two communities and two worlds, both of which the narrative implies she knows very well.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> I read the Rahab story through the lens of post-modernism. This is a reading that acknowledges the dynamics that exist between center and periphery as in this narrative.

There is no biblical record as to what happens to Rahab and her family once they escape the destruction of Jericho (Jos 6). However, in some Jewish interpretation she marries Joshua (*Meg. 14b*) and becomes the mother of priests and prophets, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Ruth Rab. 2:1; and cf. Numbers Rab. 8:9).<sup>214</sup> Lastly, Rahab is mentioned in the Matthean genealogy of Jesus as one of his ancestors, which reinforces the presence of marginalized people as part of his ancestry (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of David).<sup>215</sup>

Knowing Rahab's status helps one understand her actions. In v. 4 Rahab acts for the first time by hiding the spies and lying about their whereabouts. When the king of Jericho learns that the spies are in the land (more precisely he is told they are at Rahab's place), he sends messengers there and asks her to deliver the men, but she lies to them saying: "*... True, the men came to me, but I did not know from where they came. When the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out and I do not know where they went. Quickly pursue them and you will overtake them.*"<sup>216</sup>

Rahab's actions--what she says and does-- are profoundly shaped by a sense of survival. The fact that she hides the spies and lies to the king's men unveils the very purpose of her actions. That she received the Israelite spies in her house suggests that she knew Jericho was undergoing a military occupation and that the destruction of the city

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<sup>214</sup> Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, "Reading Rahab," 67.

<sup>215</sup> For more details on the presence of Rahab in the Matthean genealogy of Jesus see Larry L. Lyke, "What does Ruth have to do with Rahab: Midrash Ruth Rahab and the Matthean Genealogy of Jesus," in *The Function of Scripture in Early Jewish and Christian Tradition*, eds. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders (Sheffield : Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 262-284.

<sup>216</sup> In this section and subsequent chapters I do my own translation of the Hebrew text.



was imminent.<sup>217</sup> Having inside information of what was going to happen to her town gave her an advantage over others in Jericho. Still, a question of loyalty arises for me. How can she betray her own people and side with the enemy? One way to answer this question is to remember who Rahab is. She is an outsider in her own town, a prostitute or an independent woman living by the wall of the city, belonging to Jericho but yet living at the periphery of her own community. She had no strong ties to her people and, feeling excluded from society, Rahab recognized the possibility of survival for herself and her family. Then she lied about the spies' location and hid the spies on the roof of her house: *"She had brought them up to the roof and hid them with stalks of flax"<sup>218</sup> which she had laid out on the roof.*" (v.6).

Then in a lengthy speech Rahab acknowledges to the spies the mighty deeds of the God of Moses and recognizes Yahweh as the only God in the heavens and earth. In this confession, the Deuteronomistic narrator presents a picture of a Rahab who converts to the God of Joshua. It is more likely that the DH narrator deliberately portrays an acceptable view that highlights a woman and prostitute as being a Canaanite convert to the God of Israel and who "knows" all the deeds this God has done. We do not and cannot know whether her intentions of embracing Yahweh's religion were genuine. The point is not whether she really meant it but the fact that she did it. She tells the spies what they want to hear,<sup>219</sup> maybe gives them sexual favors, and in return she obtains salvation

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<sup>217</sup> Another way of looking at it is that she received the spies in her house as paying customers.

<sup>218</sup> BDB, 883. Flax פִּשְׁתִּים is a linen use with different purposes. For instance, in Hos 2:7-11 flax is used as natural product, while in Judg 15:4 is considered an inflammable material.

for her and her family. Embracing the God of Israel was her way of *resolver*, of doing what she needed to do at that point. Just as the town of Jericho is seized and colonized by the Israelites under Joshua's command, Rahab is also colonized by the Israelites. Once she and her family are saved and her town destroyed, she goes to live with the Israelites. Changing location from her Canaanite land to the Israelite land raises issues about dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized.<sup>220</sup>

The formula of Rahab's speech shows the classic Deuteronomic form of covenant that consists of several parts, beginning with a *preamble*: "For the Lord your God, he is God in heaven above, and earth beneath (2:11)." Second, it has a *prologue*: "We have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Red Sea..." etc. (2:9-11). Third, there are *stipulations* by both Rahab (2:12-13) and the spies (2:18-20), protections promised to Rahab and her house on condition of obedience. There are also sanctions (2:18-20). Rahab and her family will be saved if they keep the covenant, but will die if anyone breaks it. Fifth, there is an *oath* (2:14, 17) and finally there is a *sign* of the covenant made among them, which is signified by the crimson cord 92:18-21.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 117.

<sup>220</sup> Rahab, like her land, is colonized by the Israelites. Just as her town is conquered and destroyed, Rahab is conquered and taken to a different land. For more on post-colonial biblical interpretation of this story see Lori L. Rowlett, "Disney's Pocahontas and Joshua's Rahab in Postcolonial Perspective," in *Culture, Entertainment, and the Bible*, ed. George Aichele (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 68-75; and Musa Dube, "Rahab Says Hello to Judith: A Decolonizing Feminist Reading," in *Toward a New Heaven and a New Earth: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Maryknoll, NY.: Orbis Books, 2003), 54-72.

<sup>221</sup> K.M Campbell, "Rahab's Covenant: A Short Note on Joshua 2:9-21," in *Vetus Testamentum* 22. No.2 (1972): 243.

We see from Rahab's speech that she does not have total control over the ways things will turn out. She is very persuasive in presenting her theological and well-articulated discourse to the spies. Still, the spies have to respond to her speech and accept the deal she is proposing to them of being spared from death and destruction in the name of God. The spies receive Rahab's speech and promise to fulfill the oath *hesed* חֶסֶד that she has given to them, on condition that she does not disclose details about their mission in the land.<sup>222</sup>

### Plot, Narrator, Time, and Space in the Story

#### Plot

The plot of Chapter 2 presents Joshua sending two spies from the region of Shittim to explore the land of Jericho. The basic story has just been outlined above: The spies arrive in the land and stay, lie down or sleep שָׁכַב (sh'kab) in the house of a prostitute named Rahab. Then messengers of the king go there and inquire about the spies' location. Rahab acknowledges that the spies did come to her house, but insists that they left before the city wall was closed. She urges the king's messengers to go after them. Rahab then goes to the roof where she has hidden the spies and in a well articulated discourse she acknowledges the deeds and power of Yahweh, recognizing this God as the

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<sup>222</sup> For more details on the usage of *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible see the works of G. Clark, *The Word Hēsed in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield : JSOT Press, 1993); Katherine Dobb Sakenfeld, "Love," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 4, ed. David Noel Freedman. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 375-381; Robin L. Routledge, "Hēsed as Obligation: A Re-Examination," in *Tyndale Bulletin* 46. No. 1 (1995): 179-196; Susan Schept, "Hēsed: Feminist Ethics in Jewish Tradition," in *Conservative Judaism* 57. No. 1 (2004): 21-29.

only one. Rahab asks the spies for protection for her and her family once the city is destroyed. The spies agree to help her if she does not disclose their mission.

Rahab facilitates the escape of the spies to the mountains, advises them on the best place to stay until the king's messengers give up the search. After the spies leave Rahab's house and Jericho, she hangs a crimson cord from her windows as a sign for the Israelites to spare her house when they destroy Jericho. After three days in the mountains, the spies return to Joshua and report what they have seen in Jericho. Later in chapter 6:23-26 we find out that Rahab is saved, along with her family.

Narrator

The narrator is a key character in the story. He<sup>223</sup> has the power to show the reader the story as he wants it to be seen, emphasizing, adding, or subtracting whatever information he wants. The narrator not only presents the story, he also displays the various actions, feelings, struggles, and emotions that the characters experience. One can say that the narrator serves as a bridge for the readers to interact with the characters and relate to their experiences and dreams. The narrator introduces this story by mentioning how Joshua sent two men to search the land of Jericho. These men arrived at the house of a prostitute called Rahab and lodged there.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Although I do not exempt the possibility that there could have been female narrators at this point in history, it is more likely that people who have the power and access to writing and compiling biblical records were men.

<sup>224</sup> At no point does the narrator mention that the house of Rahab is an inn or brothel.

Once the character Rahab is introduced, the narrator spends time describing her actions, quoting what she says, disclosing her interactions with different men, specifically the king's messengers and the spies. As a feminist biblical scholar, I feel content that Rahab occupies a great deal of space in the story. Such an amount of space can equal power. She is after all the one who, from verses 4-16, is at the center of the story. She appears as the driving force of the narrative. However, the fact that Rahab occupies such a great space in the story is precisely what makes me suspect the narrator's intention. Rahab occupies the center of the story, but the Deuteronomistic editor or narrator controls how she is presented, what she says and does not say. The material of Jos 2 more likely belongs to an earlier narrator, called D (Deuteronomy-Kings).<sup>225</sup>

Although a story about a woman has a primary place in this narrative where men are the main characters organizing, planning the conquest, taking over the land and destroying Jericho, she herself does appear in the story, but she is tainted with the stigmas of that time as a foreigner, a prostitute, a woman.<sup>226</sup> Then she is mentioned by this DH redactor as someone who suddenly embraces the God of Moses, someone who appears very well informed about theology. F. Alberto Soggin reminds us that Rahab's statement in v.9 is inspired by themes coming from the ancient confessions of Israel's faith (Deut

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<sup>225</sup> The discussion of Joshua's composition materials are part of the larger theme of redaction criticism. The scholarship on this topic has been extensive throughout centuries including different voices and schools of thoughts when dealing with the redaction of the story. Among some the classic works that have lead this redactional discussions are: Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994); Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History: Deuteronomy, Joshua and Judges* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>226</sup> Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 119.

26:5b-9; Jos 24:2b-13). It is more likely that the Deuteronomic redactor made changes in this verse as a way of theologically justifying Rahab's conduct.<sup>227</sup>

Thus, it is clear to me that Rahab is a character who is manipulated by or confined to the narrator's agenda and the interests this narrator serves. He has the power to present the story, to add to and subtract elements from it. Perhaps Rahab was not a prostitute at all, but an independent woman. Maybe she never spoke the theological discourse recorded or made the agreement with the spies but such words were put on her lips by the narrator. And so I attribute more importance to those matters that we can read between the narrator's lines —and specifically Rahab's conduct itself. Her actions are what make her important. The way in which she deals with the situation at hand allows me to discover the importance of this woman's action in her society; by this I mean the way she has to appeal to trickery, deception, and strategies in order to survive. This is revealed by the narrator, whether intentionally or not.

At the end the narrator mentions the spies back in the land of Shittim reporting to Joshua what they have seen. Their report does not seem to be words from their own mouths, but rather repeat the words Rahab spoke to them earlier.

## Time

As Shimon Bar-Efrat points out in his book *Narrative Art in the Bible*,<sup>228</sup> a narrative needs time in order to exist. For him, there is a twofold relationship between

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<sup>227</sup> F. Alberto Soggin, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 373-378.

<sup>228</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 141.

narrative and time: “It unfolds time, and time passes within it.”<sup>229</sup> Time inside the narrative describes what happens in the plot and outside time points out elements to move the plot along and help to the reader’s understanding. External time uses words, collocations, sentences, and paragraphs to move the narrative and make it dynamic.<sup>230</sup>

One of the ways of seeing external time in this narrative is to see how the character’s actions are described in the *wayyiqtol* form. This form in Hebrew is introduced by the preposition *waw consecutive* (ו) and indicates a time for different actions to take place. The *waw consecutive* is a connector that can be translated in numerous ways. In v.1 the *waw* (ו) is used to indicate how the spies go to the land of Jericho, *and* they went וַיֵּלְכוּ. The *waw* is used again in the narrative as “then” to indicate sequential temporal occurrences: *then* they came וַיָּבֹאוּ *then* they lodged there וַיִּשְׁכְּבוּ-שָׁמָּה. Thus, there is a time for the spies to go to the land, then to enter it, and then to dwell there. This indication moves the plot along and allows the narrator to introduce how time is used by other characters, like the king’s messengers and Rahab.

Verse 2 begins with the phrase “and it was told” וַיִּאָמַר to the king of Jericho the news about the spies in the land. Then the king proceeds to send messengers to Rahab’s house, and he sent וַיִּשְׁלַח. This is external time as described by Shimon Bar-Efrat. In the instances above, both the spies and king use words, including prepositions, to move

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, 141-142.

the plot. Once the spies are in Rahab's house, an internal time in the narrative starts to take place.

First, Rahab asserts to the king's messengers that indeed the men have come to her. Then she detours the course of the conversation by introducing the negative conjunction "but" **לֹא** changing the course of the events and the future for the spies and Rahab. She denies knowing where the spies came from. Then the internal time in the narrative moves when she indicates that at night or in the night **בַּהַשְׁמֶרֶת** when the gate was about to close, the men left. Finally, she encouraged the king's messengers to go quickly to overtake them (vv.4, 5).

In these two verses Rahab is using internal time to her advantage. By the time the messengers ask for the spies, she replies with different information. One may say that she "buys time," saying first one thing, then another. In turn she moves the plot along. After Rahab persuades the king's messengers to go after the spies, the narrator mentions that she goes to the roof and hides them with a stalk of flax.

Rahab's next action of going to the roof, covering the spies with a stalk of flax, and delivering her speech indicate a progress in the narrative's internal time. Rahab takes her time to create a scenario that will be convincing enough to the spies to save this woman and her family. The speech's internal time is built on the sense that what Rahab describes in her speech is what is happening in the plot. The essence of this narrative's story line, one can say, is echoed in Rahab's speech. There is a sequence to the message that Rahab communicates to the spies that moves the plot of the narrative and ultimately determines the outcome of the events of this chapter.



First, she acknowledges that the land will suffer a military operation that will cause everyone's death: *She said to the men, 'I know that Yahweh has given to you this land and the fear of you has fallen upon us and that all the dwellers of the land have melted away before you (v. 9).* Rahab's words are the ones used in a context of war. The use of special terms *ʿemâ* for "dread" and *nāmōg* for "melt" indicates the language of destruction and Holy War that comes along in war scenarios (Exod 15:15-16).<sup>231</sup>

Second, after stating that her people have heard of the saving acts of the God of Israel in taking the Israelites out of Egypt, Rahab professes that the God of the spies is the only God in heaven and earth: "...for we have heard how Yahweh dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds before you when you came out of Egypt and what you did to the two Amorite kings that were beyond the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed them. Once we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was not courage left in any man to resist you, since Yahweh your God, he is God above in heaven above and on earth beneath (v.10, 11). Then having pronounced these words and established a personal connection with the spies, she asks them to reciprocate *hesed* רַחֲמִים to perform a kind act for her as she has done for them. For Rahab such *hesed* רַחֲמִים means the saving of her and her family once the town of Jericho is destroyed by the Israelites.

The spies take their time to decide whether they will fulfill the oath she is asking of them. In v.14 we learn that they promise to fulfill the oath on condition that Rahab will not disclose to anyone their mission of spying: "*And the men said to her, 'We pledge you our lives, if you do not tell these things of ours. So it will be when Yahweh gives us the land that we will deal with you kindly and faithfully.'*"

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<sup>231</sup> Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, "Reading Rahab,"62.

Then, in v.15 the external time of the narrative moves along as a new paragraph describes how Rahab helps the spies out of her house through a window. This external time progresses as Rahab reports that the spies go to the hills **לְכֹה הָהָרָה** and stay there for three days so that the king's messengers will not find them (v.16).

Next the spies in internal time give Rahab specific guidelines to follow to save herself and her family. First, she must tie a crimson cord to the window from the spies leave the house. Second, she needs to gather her family inside: *“If anyone goes out of the doors of your house into the street, his blood shall be upon his own head and we shall not be guiltless; but the blood of all staying inside the house with you will be on our heads if a hand is laid on him. But if you tell our things, we shall be guiltless in regard of the oath which you have made us swear.”* (v.19-20).

In v.21 Rahab agrees to follow the spies' instructions and lets them out of the house by means of the crimson rope that hangs in her window. Lastly, there is progression in the external time of the narrative when we learn that the spies fled to the hills, as suggested by Rahab, and stayed there for a period of three days. They return to Joshua's camp after three days and report to him the results of the mission they undertook in Jericho's land.

## Space

Space, like time, is another narrative feature significant in the process of understanding the actions of the characters of this story. Space is the arena where characters display their actions and reveal who they are. The main spaces here are:

Joshua's camp; the land of Jericho; the city gate and the city wall; the house of a prostitute; the roof of her house; and the mountains.

In the text we learn that the spies go to Jericho from Shittim, a location east of the Jordan River. This location is also mentioned in Jos 3-5 as the camp Joshua used after crossing the Jordan. Shittim is also mentioned in Num 25:1 as a destination for the Israelites, a place where "the people gave themselves over to prostitution with Moabite women." Finally, Shittim is also mentioned in Mi 6:5 *from Shittim to Gilgal*, from the east to the west side of the Jordan.<sup>232</sup>

The narrator locates the events starting with a large place, Joshua's camp in the area of Shittim, and then moves to a more specific location in the land of Jericho. Jericho is well known in the biblical records. It is mentioned three times in this chapter as the Canaanite land that is searched by the spies and later destroyed by the Israelites under Joshua's command (3:26). The region of Jericho is another important space in this story because it provides the larger setting for the narrative. Once in Jericho the events of the narrative unfold in smaller spaces: the city gate and Rahab's house roof, and window.

The city gate is an important location not only in this passage but in any text in the biblical accounts. One of the functions of the city gate is protecting the town from the outside world and from enemies. By opening and closing the city gate, the town or city has control over who enters and leaves. City gates are public spaces where the life of the town takes place (2 Kg 7:1.18). It was also the official place where people with power in the society, mainly the elders, kings, and judges of the city, sat to judge the people's

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<sup>232</sup> *BDB*, 1008.

affairs (Deut 21:19; 22:15; Amos 5:12.15; Isa 29:21; 2 Sam 18:24; 19:9; Prov 24:7; Ruth 4:1, 11; among others).<sup>233</sup>

Rahab's house is located by the city wall. This is a strategic location: like the gate, the wall was important in that it was connected to the city gate. Rahab's house was known as a house of a woman prostitute **בֵּית־אִשָּׁה זֹנָה**. Whether her house was an establishment, a brothel, or an inn is not mentioned in the text. It might be that Rahab's house was labeled as the house of a prostitute because she was indeed a prostitute or it might be that her house was named pejoratively because she lived by herself and, even more likely, because she was an independent woman. The house of Rahab is the key space in which most of the action of this narrative happens.

First we have the spies going to, entering, and dwelling there. It has already been noted that the actions of the spies coming into house and dwelling there evoke sexual overtones in the stories similar to the actions of coming **בֹּא** and lying down **שָׁכַב** with someone as sexual intercourse takes place.<sup>234</sup> Whether sexual intercourse took place or not is something we do not know. However, it is worth mentioning that the house of Rahab can be seen both as a place for the spies literally to dwell and rest and figuratively as a space to lie down and engage in sexual intercourse.

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 1045.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 98 For the verb “to come” **בֹּא** BDB mentions the following texts (Judg 15:1, 16:1; Gen 6:4, 16:2, 30:3, 38:8-9’ 39:14; Deut 22:13; 2 Sam 12:24, 16:21, 20:3 among others) where the verb means “entering a woman’s tent or apartment with the implication of *coire cum femina* (coitus with a woman). For the verb **שָׁכַב** with the connotation of intercourse BDB mentions the text of Gen 19:33, 35. For lying down with a woman in intimacy see Mi 7:5, 1012.

Second, the king's messengers come to the house asking information about the spies. Rahab sends them in the wrong direction since the spies at that point are still in the house. This time she has hidden them in the roof. After the king's messengers leave, she goes to the roof and talks to the spies.

The upper part of Rahab's house is the area where she hides the spies and also where negotiations between her and the spies take place. With the men relaxed and covered by the stalk of flax, ready to fall asleep and protected from any danger, this is the place that Rahab chooses to communicate her challenging message to them.<sup>235</sup> The roof of her house provides a safe environment for the negotiations to take place. It appears that Rahab here creates an atmosphere of trust and safety for the spies that will allow her to address the pressing issue of saving their lives at the cost of saving her own and her family's. Rahab's use of this space helps her in her plan to survive and *resolver*, to find a solution for her conflict and save herself and her family. The negotiation between the spies and Rahab is successful, and Rahab lets the spies out of her house using a crimson rope that descends from the window.<sup>236</sup>

Once out, the spies run to hide in the mountains as Rahab told them to do. The mountains are the last space mentioned in the narrative before they go back to Joshua's camp in Shittim. The mountains are a space Rahab uses to her advantage. By sending the

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<sup>235</sup> This scenario resembles the Jael 'story in Judg 4:117-23 where Jael makes Sisera feel comfortable at her tent. She covers him with a blanket, feeds him with milk and creates a comfortable and safe space for him. For more details on the Jael's story see Chapter 4.

<sup>236</sup> This act of lowering the spies out through a window resembles the text in 1 Sam 19:9-17 where Saul's daughter Michal saves David by lowering him out the window.

spies there she secures their safety and also the completion of her negotiation with them. The mountains are the safe place where the spies can wait in security until the king's messengers stop their search, and they can return to Shittim having completed their mission.

#### Reading the text through the lens of *resolviendo*

Rahab is one of those female characters of the Hebrew Bible that manage to work a way out of her limit situation by playing by the rules of her society. Being a woman, a foreigner, and a prostitute puts her in a difficult position in her society. In spite of her lack of power she uses what she has at her disposal to survive in the midst of a difficult conflict. But Rahab can be also labeled as a trickster figure.<sup>237</sup> The trickster figure typically has a variety of features. These work in pairs, which mean there is a duality in his or her personality about the actions undertaken. From the different collections of tales about the trickster figure one can see how this figure can function as someone who fools others and also plays the fool. The fool can both create and destroy.<sup>238</sup> Thus, the trickster is someone who embraces a variety of behaviors, both negative and positive. Another characteristic of trickster figures is that they use deception mainly in conditions when they lack all authority—political, economic, religious, or domestic. It is then that individuals find alternatives and strategies that will enable them to accomplish their

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<sup>237</sup> Claudia V. Camp, "Wise and Strange: An Interpretation of the Female Imagery of the Female in Proverbs in Light of the Trickster Mythology," in *Semeia* 42 (1988): 14-35. In this article Camp reminds us that there does not seem to be an "ideal" type of the trickster figure, but all that we can do is to look for features in characters that might resemble such a figure and see how they relate culturally to others. See also Tikva Simone Frymer-Kensky, "Reading Rahab," 60.

<sup>238</sup> Camp, *Wise and Strange*, 17.

goals.<sup>239</sup> Naomi Steinberg defines trickery as “the kind of power available to persons in a subordinate position *vis-à-vis* another individual.”<sup>240</sup>

In the character of Rahab we can see some of the features of the figure of the trickster as described above. She is someone who fools others when she lies to the king’s messengers that come seeking the spies. Lying to the messengers and choosing what information she gives to them grants her power. On the other hand, Rahab is in a disadvantageous position because her destiny depends on whether the spies decide to keep the promise to spare her and her family from the destruction of the city. This uncertainty gives the spies power over Rahab. Thus, in this scenario Rahab plays both sides, acting as someone with power capable of fooling others and also being dependent on what others decide about her future. Playing tricks is, therefore, one of the many tools she uses that will ultimately help her in her goal of being saved along with her family.

Another important aspect of Rahab’s story lies in the ways she uses her body as she interacts with others, like the spies. Although the biblical text labels Rahab as a prostitute, we do not know whether or not she engages in sexual activities with the spies. The presence Hebrew verbs which can refer both to physical actions of coming or entering some place and also to sexual activity give strong sexual nuances to the passage. Thus for the reader there will always be a possibility of seeing Rahab as someone who engages in sexual activities with the spies or someone who may have simply welcomed them. At any rate, the texts do leave room to appreciate the sexual overtones that are present in the story. In my opinion, these sexual overtones are not only present because of

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<sup>239</sup> Naomi Steinberg, “Israelite Trickster, their Analogues and Cross-Cultural Study,” in *Semeia* 42 (1988): 1-13.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

the types of Hebrew verbs used in the text, but also because of the ways in which the text mingles these verbs with Rahab's words and actions. In other words, the whole interaction of Rahab with the spies is couched in sensuality and seduction. I see seduction not only in the use of these verbs but also in Rahab's persuasive words to the spies. Her well-articulated theological speech to the spies is convincing and leads them to believe what she says.

Reading Rahab's story with the notion of *resolviendo* in mind allows us to see how this woman uses all she has at her disposal in order to survive. Her location as someone who lives at the city wall, and her identity as someone who is both an outsider and insider help her in her struggle. Rahab knows the worlds inside and outside the city very well. Thus she knows the best way to protect the spies when they are in her house at the city wall. She also gives them advice about the best place to hide outside the city in the mountains. As one who crosses the border and who has the freedom to go back and forth inside and outside two different worlds gives Rahab unique power.

Another important aspect of Rahab's power is that she knows the particularities of life and reality inside and outside the city. Thus she controls how she will handle the situation she faces. Her decisions to protect, hide, and advise the spies is based on what she knows about her risky situation. Furthermore, knowing the details of the reality on both sides of the city wall allows Rahab to choose specific ways of acting. Relying on what she sees around her and what she knows, she decides what actions to take and carries them out. At the end of the story, both the spies and Rahab get what they want. The spies search the land and report to Joshua. Rahab obtains security and salvation for herself and her family through deceit and trickery, cleverness and seduction. All these



elements allow me to see her as a survivor, someone who is determined to do whatever it takes to survive. It is in this way that she *resolve*.

## Chapter 3

### Judges 4:1-23: The story of Jael

A brief introduction provides a framework for understanding the stories of Jael, and that of Jephthah and his daughter, both recorded in the Book of Judges. Most scholars consider the book of Judges to be part of the Deuteronomistic History (DH), which covers four periods of the history of Israel: the era of Moses and lawgiving (Deuteronomy); the era of Joshua and the Conquest (Joshua); the era of the judges and Israelite apostasy and oppression (Jdg 1- Sam 7); and the era of the monarchy from Saul to the fall of Judah (1 Sam.8- 2 Kgs).<sup>241</sup> The era of the judges, during which this story takes place, is filled with events that, from the perspective of the DH, show the negative aspects of the early Israelite tribal society. For the DH the Davidic monarchy was necessary to provide order and the possibility of legitimate Yahweh worship. In Judges, the DH constructs a pattern in which a circularity of events takes place repeatedly. The Israelites forget YHWH and turn to other gods. YHWH then punishes them by giving them into the hands of the enemies. Once the Israelites suffer oppression, they pray to YHWH for help. Then YHWH sends them a deliverer to liberate them from their oppression. This cycle of events happens time and again with only the name of the oppressors and liberators changing.

As Denis T. Olson mentions, “scholars have debated the value of the book of Judges in reconstructing the early history of ancient Israel and after its settlements in the land of Canaan in the 12th and 11th centuries B.C.E.”<sup>242</sup> The reader should understand

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<sup>241</sup> Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: a Socio-Literary Introduction*, 240.

that Judges is religious literature in narrative, largely fictional form and not a historical book. The book emphasizes “the spirit of YHWH as moving through the history of the period...”<sup>243</sup> It is not a historical chronicle of what happened to the Israelites after they entered the land of Canaan.

The book of Judges is divided into three major sections.<sup>244</sup> The first, Chapters 1:1-3:6, introduces the book and presents the era as one of decline. The second, Chapters 3:7-16:31, introduces a list of the leaders (judges) that served Israel and their stories. Finally, in Chapters 17:1-21:35, we find the conclusion of the book and Israel’s final disintegration.

Experts in the field of biblical studies agree that the editorial process of Judges went through many stages. The composition of the book most probably started with the oral stories of different heroes. The Song of Deborah in Chapter 5, on which the narrative of Chapter 4 is based, is considered one of the oldest, if not **the** oldest, in the whole Bible.<sup>245</sup> According to Olson, the archaic Hebrew language used in the poem as well as its style is what allows scholars to make this judgment. This suggests that other stories

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<sup>242</sup> Denis T. Olson, “The Book of Judges: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*. Vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994-2002), 724.

<sup>243</sup> C.S. Kraft, “The Book of Judges,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia Identifying and Explaining all Proper Names and Significant Terms and Subjects in the Holy Scriptures*, ed George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1019.

<sup>244</sup> These sections are used in the same way by Olson, “The Book of Judges,” 728, 729.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 724.

may also have existed first in the form of narrative poems that were but transcriptions of a poetic oral tradition and later became the source for narrative chapters. Another early source that may very well have been used in Judges was some written summary of the conquest of Canaan, a source that is perhaps reflected in the first part of the book.<sup>246</sup>

The present edition of the book of Judges is the result of a process that included “several stages of collecting oral narratives in verse and prose, as much as in writing and editing.”<sup>247</sup> The writing, collecting, and editing of the stories took place during several centuries and across generations; it began at the time of King Hezekiah (8th BCE), was in process during the period of King Josiah (7th century BCE), and was completed sometime after the Babylonian exile (6th-5th century BCE).<sup>248</sup> When studying this book, therefore, one has to consider not only that it is an amalgamation of a variety of oral and written forms, but also that the text was influenced by the different historical periods during which it was edited.

The story of Jael is part of the cycle in Judges that deals with Deborah. The story of Deborah is preceded by the stories of three other judges, all military leaders who successfully delivered Israel from an enemy. The same is true of Gideon and Jephthah whose stories follow that of Deborah.

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<sup>246</sup> Kraft, “Book of Judges,” 1019.

<sup>247</sup> Olson, *The Book of Judges*,” 724.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 725.

## Summary of the narrative

While the story of Jael also appears in Chapter 5 in a poetic version, I have chosen to work with the prose version in Chapter 4 because it lends itself better to studying the details of Jael's actions, her motives, and her strategy for dealing with the situation she faces. Methodologically narrative criticism opens the text to further refinement.

The immediate context of Jael's story is provided by the narrator at the beginning of Chapter 4 in a statement that often appears, "*And again the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of YHWH...*" The narrator of Judges 4 sounds exasperated. YHWH has just solved one situation by "*raising a deliverer*" (3:15) who freed the Israelites from Eglon, and now, once again, the people of Israel are doing what YHWH sees as evil (4:1). The narrator then goes on to describe the political situation of Israel. To make sure the reader understands how bad it is for Israel, the narrator describes in detail who the ruling king is, where he lives, and how he rules. The chronicler also uses this opportunity to introduce Sisera, who will play a central role in Jael's story. The commander of King Jabin's army, Sisera had settled with his men in Harosheth-goiim. After detailed information the narrator evaluates the situation, letting us know how much the Israelites were suffering and for how long –20 years. Also, particularly important for the story of Jael, we learn King Jabin's cruelty, extended by his commander Sisera.

The narrator of Chapter 4 is more likely to be an earlier one who constructed the prose version of this chapter from the poetic one in Chapter 5. This poem also known as the Song of Deborah is considered a cultic song in the sense that "for early Israel

common life is best understood in terms of the covenant with Yahweh.”<sup>249</sup> Some of the literary features seen in the song serve the necessity of performing for a public that had gathered to be amused and uplifted in a liturgical occasion.<sup>250</sup>

The story of Deborah-Barak-Sisera constitutes the plot of the narrative in Chapter 4. The introduction of Deborah in the chapter prepares the reader for the following story of another woman, Jael. Her story takes place while the leader of Israel is a woman, the prophet Deborah (4: 4). Against this background it is not difficult to believe that Jael by herself is able to eliminate the cruel commander Sisera. In Verse 9 Deborah clearly announces what is to come, “*for YHWH will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.*” With this in mind, the reader knows what to expect when later in the chapter the narrator reports that Sisera is escaping to Jael’s tent.

Finally the narrator interrupts the story of Deborah and Barak to introduce Heber. Why? The narrator needs to introduce new information for the reader to understand the story of Jael. If the reader misses Verse 11, it will be difficult to understand why Jael acts as she does. Now we learn that she was an Israelite, giving us a possible reason for her killing Sisera, an enemy of her people. Jael’s family is related to the great legislator of Israel, Moses, a truth more significant to Jael than the fact that Jabin, the oppressor of Israel, had made peace with her husband.

These few verses set the stage for the story of Sisera and Barak, two other characters that appear in Jael’s story and who engage in a mighty battle. Sisera’s army is slaughtered and to save his life Sisera has to flee on foot. Later, towards the end of the

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<sup>249</sup> Soggin, *Judges*, 117. See also the work of J. Blenkinsopp, “Ballad Style and Psalm Style in the Song of Deborah: A Discussion,” in *Biblica* 42 (1961): 61-76.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*

story, the reader will learn that Barak was not satisfied with slaughtering Sisera's army. He also wanted Sisera dead.

Traditionally, the story of Jael has been read as a narrative of violent actions of a woman who kills a military commander. Jael has often been labeled a warrior because of the way in which she kills him by driving a tent peg into his temple.<sup>251</sup> Yet as I read through the lens of survival and *resolviendo*, it is my suspicion that Jael killed Sisera primarily to survive. Killing Sisera was what she believed she had to do to be able to live through that day and be able to face the next. Why she felt this way and why she chose to do what she did to *resolver* is what I have to find out in my study of this text.

Characters' social status and their relationships

Characters act and influence what happens in the story. Most of the characters in this chapter-- King Jabin, Heber the Kenite, Sisera, and Barak--are mentioned in Chapter 4 before this particular story starts. Jael is not mentioned by name, but there is a reference to her in v 9. Since all of the characters are mentioned before the story of Jael starts, in order to understand them better, it is necessary to know what has been said about them earlier.

Flat characters in Jael's story: King Jabin, Barak, and Heber

These three male characters in the story can be considered flat characters. Jabin, the King of Canaan, appears only at the end of the story of Jael in vv 23 and 24. The narrator tells us in v 3 all that we need to know about him: he has much power ("nine

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<sup>251</sup> Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of Woman Warrior in Judges 4," in *Semeia* 61 (1993): 99-133. Here Yee offers a reading on the metaphor of woman warrior attributed to the Jael story by different theologians, feminist and church historians.

*hundred iron chariots,*”), is a cruel man, and has oppressed the Israelites for 20 years. His oppression is what precipitates the events in this story, but he does not take an active part in what happens in the whole of Chapter 4. This is why he is labeled a flat character. He is one of the main reasons for what happens in this chapter, and at the end of the chapter, he will suffer the consequences: “*The hand of the people of Israel bore harder on Jabin, King of Canaan, until they destroyed him*” (v.24).

Barak appears as another flat character in the story of Jael although he is considered a round character in the earlier part of Chapter 4. He appears for the first time in 4: 6 when Deborah calls him and orders him to follow YHWH’s command and destroy Sisera’s army. Barak’s response may lead the reader to think that he was insecure and needed Deborah to be with him in order to carry out her orders. However, he finishes what she orders him to do and leads 10,000 men against Sisera and his 900 chariots. The story of Jael unfolds is as if Jael is taking takes over the role Barak has played earlier. In v.16 he is pursuing Sisera and in v. 17, when Jael enters the story, Barak disappears. He will reappear in v. 22 only to obey Jael and witness what she has done. In eliminating Sisera she has carried out the command that Deborah had originally given to Barak. Although a flat character, as Fewell and Gunn mention, Barak helps move the plot for it is his destroying Sisera’s army and chasing him that leads Sisera to arrive in Jael’s tent.

Heber is introduced to the reader earlier in 4:11. Nothing is said about him or what he does. We know only that he is a Kenite who has separated himself from his community and has settled down in the territory that belongs to King Jabin. We also know he is a descendant of Hobab, Moses’ father-in-law. As Ellen van Wolde notices, despite the fact that Heber’s name means “friend” *הֶבֶר*, he is described as an outsider, an



outcast. He lived in isolation from his own people and, therefore, was separated from both groups, Canaanites and Israelites.<sup>252</sup>

In v. 17 Heber is mentioned again, this time to introduce Jael. Here new information appears about the good relationship between the family of Jael and her husband and King Jabin. Even when the text does not say why Heber had settled in Jabin's territory, Fewell and Gunn suggest that Heber has gone to live in Kedesh, apart from the Israelites, to seek employment with Jabin's chariots. Therefore, it can be assumed that both Heber and Jael are allies of King Jabin of Canaan and opposed to the Israelites.<sup>253</sup> However, Sakenfeld argues that although Heber and Jael had settled down in Canaanite land, they still considered themselves Israelites.<sup>254</sup> I suggest the possibility that although Heber had settled in Jabin's territory and may have been loyal to him, Jael may very well have felt different from Heber and felt loyal to the Israelites.

Sisera

According to Gunn and Fewell's classification of characters, Sisera is a round character. His fate seems to be almost the reverse of Barak's. A less developed character before the beginning of this story, he becomes much more complex beginning at v. 17. In v. 2 Sisera's social status is described. He is a military figure, which at that time meant he

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<sup>252</sup> Ellen Van Wolde, "Ya'el in Judges 4," in *Zeitschrift Fur Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 107 (1995): 245.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>254</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's Mother," in *Women, Gender, and Christian Community*, ed. Jane Dempsey Douglass and James F. Kay (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 15.

was also a political figure. In v. 12 he is informed about the strategy of Deborah and Barak and, as a result, in v. 13 he acts for the first time: *“So Sisera called out all his chariots -- nine hundred iron chariots -- and all the men who were with him from Harosheth-goiim to the Wadi Kishon.”*

Immediately before Jael’s story begins, the reader is informed that Sisera has been defeated and is fleeing in panic from the Israelite army. He finds refuge in Jael’s tent. The story does not say how he knew he would be safe there, but there is no doubt from the way he behaves that, once he is in Jael’s tent, Sisera feels safe. The irony is that Sisera runs from a possible death at the hands of Barak’s army and looks for his salvation in Jael’s tent where, instead of safety, he will find death or maybe sexual favors.

In v. 18 one imagines Sisera relaxing, lying down, for if not, how could Jael have covered him? Was he naïve in trusting a woman he did not know? Most probably not. He trusts Jael either because he knows her or because he is certain of the faithfulness of her household to Jabin. This story is not about a foolish man who falls prey to an intelligent woman. Perhaps the military defeat he had just suffered has made him vulnerable and he becomes dependant on Jael.

Sisera asks Jael for water. Instead she offers him milk, and he must have drunk it for the story does not indicate any conflict between Sisera and Jael. Relaxed but not totally unaware of possible dangers, Sisera’s last words in the story are to Jael. Acting as the military commander that he was, he orders her to stand guard while he rests: *“He said to her, ‘Stand at the door of the tent. And If any man comes and asks you and says – is anyone here, say ‘No’(v.20).* This verse indicates Sisera’s need not only for a place to rest but also for a place in which to be safe. He falls asleep, and Jael puts her plan into action.

Her first blow must have been fatal, for the story gives no indication that Sisera woke up and struggled for his life. The great military commander dies at the hands of the woman he has trusted to protect him.

## Jael

Jael is the main character of this story and serves as the narrator's spokesperson.<sup>255</sup> She is indeed a round character, yet what we know about her is limited to what is said in vv. 18-23.<sup>256</sup> The meaning of her name provides clues into the way this character thinks, and what she does. Van Wolde<sup>257</sup> and Scott C. Layton<sup>258</sup> have different interpretations of Jael's name. Van Wolde analyzes the name of Jael through Phoenician language. She takes the name Jael and re-vocalizes it to Ya'al in Phoenician. She analyses Jael's name as a *yiqtol* third person masculine singular form of the root  $\text{אָלַל}$ , "to go up." From Van Wolde's perspective, Jael is someone who is going up (and out) to face Sisera. For Van Wolde, Jael's actions are pre-indicated by the meaning of her name "to go up." This approach to Jael's name is questioned and critiqued by Layton. He thinks it unacceptable from two perspectives: methodologically and philosophically. Van Wolde, according to Layton, erroneously goes to the Phoenician root for Jael's name

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<sup>255</sup> Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 47.

<sup>256</sup> In v. 9 Deborah makes indirect reference to Jael when she talks to Sisera about how Sisera would die at the hand of a woman: "... *however, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory for YHWH will sell Sisera into the hands of a woman.*"

<sup>257</sup> Van Wolde, "Ya'el in Judges 4," 240-46.

<sup>258</sup> Scott C. Layton "Ya'el in Judges 4: An Onomastic Response," in *Zeitschrift Fur Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 109 (1997): 93-94.

instead of the Hebrew. He argues that in order to find the meaning of the name Jael, she should have looked at the Hebrew. Ya'el in Hebrew is a common noun, a *qatil*, a base noun that means “mountain goat.” So for Layton, Jael is a Hebrew name that refers to a wild animal. He analyzes the name Jael by studying other cognates of this word in different Semitic languages and concludes without doubt that the meaning of her name is a mountain goat.<sup>259</sup> Both possible meanings of the name Jael fit the main character of this story. If one considers the Phoenician meaning, we see Jael as a woman who takes initiative, who does not hide from the warrior running towards her but rather is willing to go up to him. If her name has a Hebrew meaning of mountain goat or wild animal, the reader can then see Jael as someone who is unorthodox, who acts in ways different from how others would act.<sup>260</sup> I think the character of Jael embraces both meanings of her name. She is a woman who takes initiative and faces the situation in which she is immersed, and she is also someone who definitely finds unconventional ways as a solution for her conflict.

Jael appears in v. 17 and is identified as the wife of Heber, the Kenite. She is described by 1st-century CE philosopher Philo as “very beautiful in appearance,” who “adorns herself” and goes out “to meet” Sisera.<sup>261</sup> In v. 21 she is mentioned again as the wife of Heber. From a feminist perspective what is at play here is the andocentric understanding of women that operated in the society at that time. The second piece of

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<sup>259</sup> Layton also makes the connection the meaning of Jael that belongs to the animal realm with Deborah’s one (bee).

<sup>260</sup> Mieke Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 212.

<sup>261</sup> Philo Pseudo, M.R. James, Louis H. Feldman, *The Biblical Antiquities of Philo* (New York: Ktab Pub House, 1971), 31; cf. Judg 4: 9.

information the reader gets concerns Jael's ethnic or tribal identity or, perhaps more important, her tribal loyalty. According to the text, Jael is the wife of Heber, the Kenite, whose family had a good relationship with King Jabin. Thus, the fact that there was a good relationship between Heber's family and Jabin's family is indicative of the loyalty Heber had to the King. This might lead us to conclude that Jael too shared this loyalty. However, this view is challenged by Mieke Bal. Her discussion of the "anthropological code" regarding the process of assimilation of tribal, semi-nomadic newcomers throws a new light on this issue. According to Bal, that "there was peace between Jabin the King of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite" (v. 17), does not guarantee that Jael, Heber's wife, would be loyal to Jabin, particularly in a circumstance where Jabin was battling her people of origin.<sup>262</sup>

If there was no guarantee that Jael was loyal to Jabin, why does Sisera go to her tent when there was a possibility that he might not be safe there? According to Bal, Sisera made this mistake, because he did not know the social code. Yet Gunn and Fewell insist Sisera knew the social code well. He went to the tent because in that patriarchal society women were expected to be both mothers and lovers to men, protecting them at all times.

<sup>263</sup> Gunn and Fewell compare what happens here to what happened between Leah and Jacob (Gen 30:16): "Like a persuasive Leah coming out to 'hire' Jacob's sexual services,

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<sup>262</sup> Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship in Sisera's Death* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 60.

<sup>263</sup> David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4-5," in *Journal of American Academic of Religion* 3 (1990): 392.

Jael comes out to meet Sisera and to invite him into her tent and like an all too willing Jacob, Sisera complies.”<sup>264</sup>

Whether Sisera did or did not know the social code, the important element is that Jael knew what she could or could not do. She knew the exceptions to the rules and the few alternatives society would allow her. In Near Eastern cultures the host was responsible for the entertaining and protection of the guest. Most of the time, a male guest would have been received by a male host.<sup>265</sup> In his article “Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4,”<sup>266</sup> Victor H. Matthews offers a more comprehensive study on the hospitality code in the story of Jael. He holds that both Sisera and Jael break the codes of hospitality. On one hand, “Jael’s actions do contain conscious misuse of this ritual to lure Sisera to his death.”<sup>267</sup> On the other, “Sisera is more culpable than Jael in his systematic violation of every step in the customary ritual.”<sup>268</sup> However, one possibility of Sisera’s breaking of the hospitality codes is that he contemplates the chance of having sexual relationship with Jael. Sisera was most likely aware of the hospitality codes and instead of choosing someone else’s tent as a refuge from Barak’s army, he chooses that of a woman.

In order to comprehend the intentionality behind Jael’s actions, it is important to take a look at the Hebrew words and phrases that describe what Jael does.

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<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> Sakenfeld, “Deborah, Jael, and Sisera’s Mother,” 20.

<sup>266</sup> Matthews, “Hospitality and Hostility in Judges 4,13-20.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

“Turn aside, my Lord, turn to me” – סוּרָה אֶלַי סוּרָה אֶדְנִי סוּרָה

In v. 18 Jael appears greeting Sisera. She goes out to meet him and says to him: “*Turn in, my Lord, turn to me...*” The Hebrew verb used in this verse is סוּר and it is used in the Qal. Impv. 2m.s. This verb סוּר is frequently used in the Hebrew Bible and has at least four meanings: “to cause to turn aside or to engage in apostasy;” “to depart;” “to be removed from oppressive chains;” and “to come to an end.”<sup>269</sup> Each of these meanings has a variety of nuances depending on the different verbal form used. The last meaning does not appear in the Deuteronomistic History, and I will not analyze it in this chapter.

The first use of the verb as “to cause to turn aside or to engage in apostasy” can be seen in texts belonging to the Deuteronomistic History, such as Exod 3:4; Deut 9:12; 1 Sam 6:3. In the first example, סוּר refers to the physical action of turning aside, like Moses turning aside to look at the burning bush (Exod 3:4) or to YHWH’s hand that will not turn away from the people (1 Sam 6:3). In its other meaning, such as in Deut 9:12, it refers to the action of apostasy, of turning aside from YHWH’s path to follow other gods. Here YHWH speaks to Moses with this complaint. Another example of the use of סוּר is in Gen 38:14 in the story of Tamar. This particular meaning of “turning aside,” also can be nuanced to denote a turning from one’s own course (Deut 2:27; 1 Sam 6:12; and 2 Sam 2:21-22).

The second meaning of סוּר is “to depart.” Depart has many nuances. It can mean “to depart from a route” (1 Sam 15: 6, Num 12:10; Judg 16:20). In the first

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<sup>269</sup> BDB, 693-694.

example, “to depart” has the connotation of withdrawing, of leaving a place to avoid being destroyed. In Num 12:10 the use of the verb indicates how the cloud, which is YHWH’s manifestation to Aaron and Miriam, withdrew from their tent. Finally in Judg 16:20, YHWH departs from Samson once the strength he had from his hair was cut off by Delilah.

Third, the verb סִוַּר also means “to remove” or not remove things. In 1 and 2 Kings there is a long list of verses that use this verb to indicate how even when the shrines were removed, the people continued to sacrifice and make offerings there (1 Kgs 15:14, 22:44; 2 Kgs 12:4, 15:4, 35).<sup>270</sup> “Remove” also is used to indicate removing animals or insects. In Exod. 8:3, Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron to intercede with YHWH, so the frogs will be removed from him and his people. Then, in v. 27, YHWH removes the swarms of insects.<sup>271</sup>

Of these three possible meanings for the verb סִוַּר the one that seems to function best in this text is “pay attention to me.” I read this phrase, “*turn in, my Lord, turn to me,*” as an invitation from Jael to Sisera to pay attention to her as a woman. Taking into consideration what Gunn and Fewell say about the social code that expected women to protect men both as mothers and lovers, I believe we can suggest that Jael is presented here as a seductress. Knowing, as we do now, that Jael did not believe she had to be

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<sup>270</sup> This verb also means to be removed from the yoke’s oppression as in the case of Isa. 14:25, which mentions an oracle from YHWH where there is a declaration of freedom that will overflow once the yoke drops off Assyria. Although Isaiah does not belong to the DH, I believe it is important to include this example of the usage of סִוַּר.

<sup>271</sup> One last meaning of this verb, which I am not including in this story because it is not found in the DH, is “to come to an end.” Again, the two texts mentioned by BDB, 693-694 are Am. 6:7 and Isa. 11:13. In Isaiah 11:13 this verb indicates how Ephraim’s envy will come to an end. In the case of Amos, the prophecy also talks about how there should be an end to the festive meals.



faithful to King Jabin simply because her husband was loyal to him, we may now conclude that perhaps Jael was willing to seduce Sisera so he would come into her tent and she could kill him.

The use of this same word, סָוַר, in the story of Tamar in Gen 38:14, I believe, backs up the claim I am suggesting here. סָוַר is used to describe how Tamar took off her widow's garment and dressed as a prostitute in order to seduce her father-in-law. Thus, it could be argued that this verb, "to turn in or aside," has sexual nuances in situations that resemble those of Tamar and Jael. It is important to notice that this verb is used in the context of two women who were in disadvantageous situations: one is without children; the other one has to face the commander of Jabin. They use their power to seduce in order to be able to face the difficult situations in which they found themselves and get through the day and gain something that is significant for their people.

Using these same meanings of סָוַר "to turn aside," also allows for different reading of this verse in Jael's story. "Turning aside" also refers to offering shelter or refuge. Two biblical passages illustrate this meaning of סָוַר Gen 19: 1-2 and 2 Kgs 4:10-11. In Gen 19:1-2 סָוַר is used by Lot when he talks to the angels asking them to stay with him: *"The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them and, bowed himself with his face to the earth, and he said, "I pray you my lords, turn aside סָוּרוּ to the house of your servant to spend the night, and wash your feet; then you may rise up early and be on your way."*

In 2 Kgs 4:10-11 a wealthy woman from Shunem offers the prophet Elisha lodging and food when he comes to the town. The woman and her husband agree to provide the prophet with whatever he needs: “*Let us make a small enclosed roof chamber with walls, and put a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp for him, so that he can go in there whenever he comes to us.*” One day he came there; and he turned סוֹרֵר into the chamber and lay down there.” These uses of סוֹרֵר referring to “offering refuge or shelter,” allows reading Jael’s words as offering hospitality to Sisera.

“Have no fear, or do not fear” -- אַל-תִּירָא

These words spoken by Jael to Sisera are a priestly formula, “Do not be afraid.” It appears in the Deuteronomistic History 13 times. Most of the time, these words are spoken by YHWH to Joshua (Josh 8:1, 10:8) or to Moses (Num 21:34; Deut 3:2). The same words are used when Moses speaks to the people (Exod 14:13), and also when Samuel addresses the people (1 Sam 12:20). These words not only constitute a priestly formula, but are also the words pronounced in a holy war cry (Josh 8:1; 10:8; Num 21:34, Deut 1:21; Exod 14:13).<sup>272</sup> In the case of Joshua, for example, YHWH reassures him that he does not have to be afraid because YHWH will deliver the enemies into his hands.

Jael utters these words of comfort and hospitality to Sisera, pledging a sense of security and protection. Specifically, the words, “*Have no fear*” offer Sisera both reassurance and an indication that Jael has the situation under control. Her use of this priestly formula shows that she is quite clever, choosing words used in the context of

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<sup>272</sup> Eunice Blanchard Poethig, *The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel* Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 1985), 187.

conflict and war to offer security. Second, through these words she is using what we could consider a “religious discourse.” This signals to the reader that Jael considers herself to be on the side of YHWH. Given the way the chapter opens and closes, this reading is not far-fetched.<sup>273</sup>

Another crucial implication in Jael’s use of the priestly formula is related to the issue of gender. The words she pronounces were typically articulated only by men and by a male God. However, Jael is a courageous woman not afraid of using the language of the religious system. In doing this she breaks through the gender barriers. She appropriates this priestly formula making it her own, just as Moses, Joshua, and Samuel did. She makes YHWH’s words her own, challenging the male boundaries imposed on her by her society. She breaks the rules that exclude her from knowing.

“And she covered him” – **וַתִּכְסֶהוּ**

The verb “to cover” is frequently used throughout the Hebrew Bible, including in the Deuteronomic History. “To cover” has different nuances of meaning, all of them closely related. To begin with, it simply means to cover or to clothe the human body. The BDB gives this text of Jael covering the body of Sisera as an example of this meaning.<sup>274</sup> It also means to cover people’s nakedness. In Gen 9:23 the verb is used when Noah’s sons covered the nakedness of their father. In Exod 28:42, YHWH gives directions how to create tunics to cover the nakedness of Aaron’s sons. “To cover” **כָּסָה** also refers to

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<sup>273</sup> This aspect resembles the Rahab story. Through her speech she locates herself on the side of the God of Israel.

<sup>274</sup> BDB, 491.

covering one's face, like in Gen 38:15, a text that records how Tamar takes off her widowhood dress, covers her face with a veil, and sits down at the entrance of Enamin waiting to see Judah pass by. Another nuance of the verb "to cover" is "to conceal blood." In Gen 37:26 this verb is mentioned by Judah when he talks with his brother about covering the blood of their brother Joseph. Another text, Deut 23:14, uses it to refer to the soldiers being ordered to cover their own excrement when in the fields. Finally, "to cover" also has the connotation of protecting. To cover is used to imply protection given to places like the sacred tent and the tabernacle in Exod 26: 13, Num 4:9.15<sup>275</sup>

Three of these meanings have relevance for the usage of סִוַּר in Jael's story. As indicated above, Jael covering Sisera could have been simply to warm him up and comfort him when he lies down to rest. However, the use of סִוַּר here could also be related to "concealing blood." Sisera could have been bleeding because of superficial wounds or could have been covered with blood from those around him that were wounded or killed. Finally, Jael covering Sisera could indicate that she was simply protecting him. Different scholars point out that this act of covering can be seen as maternal action on Jael's part, a maternal act reinforced by the fact that she gave him milk instead of water.<sup>276</sup> Another possibility is that if sexual intercourse took place between Sisera and Jael she "covered" him with her body.

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<sup>275</sup> There are nuances of the verb that do not show any connection with this passage such as "to cover, spread" used for the leprosy dry skin and flesh Lev.13:12,13, the cloud of the theophany , the mount of Exod 24: 15-16, the tent of meeting Exod 40:34 Num 17:6 and the tabernacle Num 9:15-16.

<sup>276</sup> Gunn and Fewell, "Controlling Perspectives," 389-411.

“A skin of milk” – אֶת־נְאוֹד הַחֶלֶב

Milk is mentioned in the Deuteronomic History 26 times. Milk has different connotations in this body of literature. It can refer to the common food that is drunk as in Gen 18:8 where milk is prepared by a servant boy for Abraham and Sarah to eat.<sup>277</sup> Milk is also used in a figurative sense to talk about the whiteness of one’s teeth, as in Gen. 49:12 when Jacob is blessing his sons, assuring them that everything will be perfect for them, that even their teeth will be white like milk.

Milk is mostly used in biblical literature to talk about the productiveness of the land, specifically the promise that YHWH makes to Abraham that he will give him and his descendants a land that flows with milk and honey (Exod 3:18,17; 13:5; 23:19; 33:3; Lev 20:24; Num 13:27; 14:8; 16:13,14; Deut 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20; Josh 5:6). Milk is also used to name animal milk, like the milk of the sheep that was used to feed Jacob (Deut 32:14).

For Gunn and Fewell, the milk Jael offers Sisera is indicative of her maternal caring for him. Lillian Klein and Victor Matthews are two other scholars who refer to the maternal aspect of the use of milk.<sup>278</sup> Of course this can be linked to the reading of סִיר that refers to offering hospitality or refuge. Mieke Bal offers a very different perspective: a sense of anti-mothering, of killing instead of giving life. Bal says that “the over determination of the milk motif provides further support to the isotropy of the avenging

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<sup>277</sup> It is interesting that the Hebrew verb used in the verse for the consumption of the milk is “to eat,” which is used in the Qal. Imp. 3m.p. See *BDB*, 37.

<sup>278</sup> Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 39-40; Matthews, “Hospitality and Hostility,” 13-21.

mothers.”<sup>279</sup> A very different kind of reading of this text is offered also by Gunn and Fewell who read the use of water, not milk, as having sexual overtones.<sup>280</sup> In Prov 5:15; 16:9-17 and Song 4:15 water is symbolic of both male and female sexuality. Read this way, Sisera’s lying down at Jael’s tent is suggestive of sexual encounter, although we do not know whether that happened.<sup>281</sup>

Plot, narrator, time and space in the narrative

Plot

Plot “is the organizing force or principle through which the narrative meaning is communicated.”<sup>282</sup> This ground plan is a simple one with only two main characters and one minor one, Barak. Besides these three acting characters there is another just mentioned in passing, Heber, Jael’s husband. Finally there are three other characters who do not act but who influence the plot: YHWH who is given credit for destroying the oppressor of the Israelites; the Israelites whose hands “bore harder and harder” on their enemy; and Jabin, the enemy who is destroyed.

Having considered the characters at some length, we know the plot: the commander Sisera flees from a battle when his army is destroyed runs for his life to the tent of a woman called Jael. She greets him, invites him into her tent, accommodates his request for something to drink, and once he falls asleep, she drives a tent peg through his

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<sup>279</sup> Bal, *Death & Dissymmetry*, 213.

<sup>280</sup> Gunn and Fewell, “Controlling Perspectives,” 392.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, 101.

temple killing him. When his enemy appears on the scene Jael shows him the man he is looking for lying there dead. The narrator tells us that the killing of Sisera by Jael signals that YHWH is subduing Jabin before the Israelites. This is a decisive event that inevitably leads to the Israelites completely destroying Jabin, King of Canaan.

Narrator

The narrator who tells Jael's story in Judges 4, describes how it happens and offers his evaluation of the events is quite likely the narrator of the D source who is using the song of Deborah, the poetic version of Chapter 5 to shape the prose version that will better fit in the Deuteronomist History.<sup>283</sup>

In v. 17 the narrator starts this particular story in a way that captures the reader's attention: Sisera is fleeing from the place where his whole army has been killed. In v. 17 the narrator introduces Jael as "wife" as he<sup>284</sup> has done in v. 4 with Deborah. Using a feminist "hermeneutics of suspicion,"<sup>285</sup> I question the agenda of the narrator in mentioning Jael as the wife of Heber, the Kenite. I suggest that the narrator mentions this relation to her husband because in a patriarchal society and in an andocentric text, Jael's social status depends on being connected to a male. This narrator, a product of his time and of the andocentric world in which he lives, identifies Jael by mentioning to whom she belongs. Personally she is not important. What is important to the narrator and his world

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<sup>283</sup>See the works of Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, and Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History Part I: Deuteronomy, Joshua and Judges* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>284</sup>For more on the discussion of gender of the narrator see footnote # 53 of previous chapter.

<sup>285</sup>Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

is that she is married to Heber. However, her marriage to Heber can be socially questioned because she seduces and kills the man who comes asking for refuge. Thus Jael challenges and deconstructs social conventions as a married woman murdering the enemy Canaanite commander in her tent.

In vv. 18 to 22, the narrator gives a meticulous description of the encounter between Jael and Sisera. These events are the centerpiece of the whole chapter, and the narrator highlights them by describing them in great detail. However, initially the narrator does not say much about the mighty deed Jael has done. It is described matter-of-factly. The narrator does not congratulate her or praise her for what she had done. Even when Barak comes in to be a witness of what she has accomplished, he does not thank her, and he does not congratulate her.

In vv. 23 and 24, the tone of the narrator changes. He had described the story with simplicity though in an intriguing way that holds the attention of the reader. Now at the end, when he offers his evaluation of the events, his tone changes. He admires what has happened and although he never praises Jael for what she has done, he indicates that what happened that day was the beginning of the end for Jabin. What Jael has done makes YHWH's work present. YHWH has subdued Jabin through what Jael has done. The end of Jael's story is also the end of Chapter 4. The narrator ends the chapter the way he started by giving his evaluation of what has taken place: "On that day God subdued King Jabin of Hazor before the Israelites. The hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan." Jael's actions deconstruct social and theological conventions as we see Yahweh working through a woman. She reminds us of other women throughout the Hebrew Bible who do the same



(Tamar in Gen 39:1-40; the midwives in Exod 1; Ruth; and Judith).

## Time

In Jael's story I want to analyze particularly how narrative time works in vv. 18-23, and how it shapes the course of the narrative, setting a certain rhythm for what happens within the story. As Ellen Van Wolde mentions, Jael's actions are written in the *wayyiqtol* form.<sup>286</sup> This form of Hebrew verbs, introduced by the *waw consecutive*, is translated into English mostly by the conjunction "and." In this story, all the actions Jael undertakes are introduced by the *waw consecutive*. Verse 18: **And** Jael came out יַעֲלֵי to meet Sisera, **and** said וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו to him to come inside and not be afraid. At the end of v. 18 it says **and** she covered וַתִּכְסֶהוּ him with a rug." Verse 19 says, **so** she opened וַתִּפְתַּח a skin of milk and gave him a drink וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ **and** covered וַתִּכְסֶהוּ him.<sup>287</sup> In v. 21 the action comes to a climax again and the *wayyiqtol* form is repeatedly used: **But** Jael took וַתִּקַּח יַעֲלֵי a tent peg הָאֵהָל , **and** placed a hammer in her hand וַתִּבְרָח בְּיָדָהּ , **and** went וַתִּבֹּא to him softly, **and** drove וַתִּתְקַע the peg into his temple, **till** it went down וַתִּצְנַח into the ground.<sup>288</sup> After Sisera is killed, two

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<sup>286</sup> Van Wolde, "Ya'el in Judges 4," 244.

<sup>287</sup> In the poetry version of chapter 5 it is mentioned that offered him milk, which indicates a more seductive possibility.

<sup>288</sup> John Joseph Owens, *Analytical Key to the Old Testament Volume 2*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), 20.

other waw forms are used to mark external time, to indicate the plot's timeline in v. 22: And behold Barak" בָּרַק וַהֲגִיָּהּ and Jael went out יָצְאָה יַעֲלֵה. This verse is important in so far as time is concerned for it emphasizes the prediction that Deborah pronounced that he would die at the hand of a woman, a shameful disgrace to a warrior.

Analyzing Jael's actions one can see how the narrator uses the *wayyiqtol* forms to deal with external time within which the story happens. Then, at the end of the chapter in v. 23, the narrator concludes the story telling us that YHWH defeated King Jabin "on that day," the day when Jael kills Sisera. The expression "on that day" marks the specific duration of time within which the story has taken place, setting up the ending of the narrative. The narrator brings the story to an end in the same verse by explaining to the readers how the Israelites fought harder and harder, "until they destroyed Jabin King of Canaan." The use of the preposition "until" denotes the completion of the action letting the reader know that the story has come to an end.

This analysis of the use of external time or narration time gives the reader an understanding of how the narrator constructed the story and it allows me to deduce why he constructed it the way he did. Obviously the narrator is working towards the conclusion, which parallels the beginning: YHWH is the main character in all of the stories of the people of Israel. Judg 4: 28, the end of the story, also uses external time to highlight the importance of what happened on one given day, the day that Jael killed Sisera. The analysis of the external time I have presented here, I believe, indicates that what Jael did was at the heart of the day when YHWH "subdued Jabin the King of Canaan." Step by step, Jael proceeded along the timeline of the plot to bring about what

Deborah had prophesied even before the story begins: YHWH will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman, into the hands of Jael (v. 9).

#### Internal Time or Narrated Time

As Bar-Efrat claims, a story always requires internal time. It is in the internal time “where the characters and the incidents exist in time. Everything changes during the course of the narrative as well as everything that remains static remains within time.”<sup>289</sup>

In vv. 18-23 there are many sequences that reveal the internal time. The first internal time reveals that something has been going on connected to this story before it begins. Sisera flees from the battle and arrives at Jael’s tent: “*Sisera, meanwhile, had fled on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was friendship between King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite.*” Once Sisera arrives at Jael’s tent, a second internal time in the narrative appears: “*Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, ‘Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid.’ So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a rug.*” From this point on in the story, all of the action is directed by Jael. Sisera talks in the story and even gives orders. Barak towards the end of the story also acts. However, all the action of the characters, which guides and sets the internal time, is directed by Jael. It is her use of time that is both made explicit in the story and is used by the narrator to move the plot along focusing the reader’s attention on Jael in the story.

Once Sisera arrives at the tent, the time in the story is filled with what Jael does. She occupies the timeframe of the story greeting Sisera and inviting him to turn to her

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid, 141.

and not fear. Sisera, in response to Jael's direction, occupies time by entering the tent. She immediately takes hold of the time of the story again and covers him. Up to this point we can see how Jael makes use of the internal time, handling it wisely to control the action of the plot. Jael is so much in charge of the time – the action – that Sisera has nothing to do but fall asleep. Once Sisera is asleep, it is obvious that the one who guides the use of time is Jael.

Once Jael has killed Sisera, another episode of the story starts, and the move from what has happened to the next event is also controlled by Jael. She is the one who comes out of the tent, as she had done at the beginning of the story, and invites Barak to come into the tent as she had invited Sisera. Barak's use of time and Jael telling him what to do ends the action of the story. Contrary to the purpose of inviting Sisera into the tent to be seduced and killed, Jael invites Barack inside the tent to show him that she has killed the enemy. The rest of the story occurs from the perspective of external time, allowing the narrator, as I explained above, to tie Jael's story to the rest of what has happened in the chapter as a whole.

## Space

Three spaces are occupied by the characters in Jael's story: the camp, the tent, and the Sisera's sleeping or resting place – most probably the ground.<sup>290</sup> First I turn my attention to the camp where Jael's tent is one among others. Although the text does not say that there is a camp, it is an almost certain fact that the story of Jael takes place in a

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<sup>290</sup> I do not take the approach of many other scholars that sexual intercourse took place in this story. This is why I do not develop the idea of Jael's body as a fourth space.

camp. One possibility is that her tent would not have stood by itself, isolated, in the middle of nowhere. Gottwald explains that a number of families usually came together to form a protective association like the clan. However, in Jael's case we do not know for sure where her tent was located. I believe that the narrative in v. 4 indicates that Heber had separated himself from his tribe, made up of a number of clans. However, from the narrative it is possible to believe that he lived with his clan. If not, he had to live at least with his kin, those who belonged to his household – what today we would call an extended family that includes much more than the nuclear family.<sup>291</sup> Sakenfeld mentions that there is little knowledge about the organization of camps in Israelite society.<sup>292</sup> Ann Wansbrough indicates, indirectly, that in the camp there was a women's quarter when she explains that "if a man who is not a close member of the family enters a woman's quarter, he has sexual intentions."<sup>293</sup> From this information we can gather that Jael's tent was in a camp, and most probably in the women's quarter of the camp.

The second space, and probably the most important one in the story, is Jael's tent. In the opening two verses of the story her tent is mentioned three times: Sisera flees to her tent, Jael comes out of the tent, and Sisera enters the tent.

The tent in the Hebrew Bible is the place where people lived. The tent functions not only as the family household, but also as the place where sexual intercourse takes

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<sup>291</sup> Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 338-41, referenced in, Gail A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Woman," 110.

<sup>292</sup> Sakenfeld, "Deborah, Jael, and Sisera's Mother," 3-22.

<sup>293</sup> Ann Wansbrough, "Blessed be Jael among the Women: for she Challenged Rape," in *Women of Courage: Asian Women Reading the Bible*, eds. Oo Chung Lee [et.al] (Seoul: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology, 1992), 101-110.

place. This is made obvious in Gen 24:67 where Isaac's bringing Rebeka into the tent means that she has become his wife. The tent is the place where marriage is consummated, by sexual activity.<sup>294</sup>

In Jael's story, even when there is no explicit mention of sexual intercourse between Sisera and Jael as there is in the text of Genesis regarding Isaac and Rebeka, this insistence in the story regarding Jael's tent can be read as having sexual overtones.<sup>295</sup> Furthermore, there are scholars who contend that in biblical literature it is rare to have a man entering a woman's tent for any purpose other than sexual activity. Gunn and Fewell go a step further adding that tents can be seen as symbols of women's bodies.<sup>296</sup> In the case of Sisera and Jael they say that, "Sisera like a man penetrating his lover, has entered, upon invitation, a women's sphere."

Without dismissing this discussion about the sexual overtones of the tent, it is worthwhile to look at other conclusions drawn by Mieke Bal regarding Jael's tent. The fact that Jael appears by herself in the tent without her husband may indicate that this was a harem tent or simply that she was an independent woman, living by herself in the women's tent, set apart from the men's tent. In the case of Jael, Bal chooses the second possibility, seeing Jael as an independent woman living by herself in her own tent. Many biblical scholars might find this possibility difficult to accept precisely because it

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<sup>294</sup> Tents are also described in the Hebrew Bible as the place where YHWH and humans meet as well as being the tabernacle, the place where YHWH resided. For example, in Exod 40:35 Moses is not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud was resting upon the tent of meeting and the presence of YHWH filled the place. This use of tent does not come into play in Jael's story.

<sup>295</sup> Gunn and Fewell, "Controlling Perspectives," 392; Wansbrough, "Blessed be Jael among the Women," 110.

<sup>296</sup> Gunn and Fewell, "Controlling Perspectives," 393.

indicates women's independence and control over their life without the need for a male in their living space.<sup>297</sup>

Once Sisera is inside the tent, another specific space comes into view in the story, the space and place where he lies down. Sisera must have lain down on the ground, because later the text describes how Jael drives the tent peg through Sisera's temple and the peg comes out on the other side of his head pinning him to the ground. However, when he first enters the tent, this small place where he lies down is a place of comfort for Sisera. After he is killed by Jael, this is the same space where Barak, who had led the Israelite army against Sisera's troops, finds his dead body.

The use of space in the story helps to narrow the focus of the plot. From a huge battlefield that can fit 10,000 Israelites and Jabin's 900 chariots, the reader is moved to a family or tribal camp. Then the story perhaps moves us to the women's quarters in the camp, and then to the entrance of Jael's tent. The reader finally enters Jael's tent with Sisera and then is moved to consider a small space within the tent, the space occupied by Sisera when he lies down. This movement from a very wide space to a narrow one acts like a spotlight, guiding the reader to the climactic action of the story.

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<sup>297</sup> Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 212. Leo Perdue raises a different point by arguing that the women's tent is that of the chief wife who lives separately from the husband who at times entertains and has other types of activities with other men. This could not occur according to social convention, if the two shared a tent. Private conversation with Dr. Leo Perdue, February, 28, 2008.

Reading the text through the lens of *resolviendo*

Scholars, commentators, and preachers have always found Jael's story difficult to digest. The difficulty has to do with what Jael does. Jael is seen as a "bad woman" not only because it is supposed she seduces Sisera, but also because she then violates the hospitality code by killing him. This negative way of seeing Jael is made on the basis of various assumptions about violence and gender. Jael uses violence to *resolver* the situation she faces, and understandably this does not meet with everyone's approval. Yet, faced with the same dilemma, men would typically be hailed as heroes for doing the same thing. For instance, in the previous chapter in the Book of Judges, we read about Ehud being set apart by God to liberate the Israelites. Ehud assassinates Eglon, a king who was oppressing the Israelites. Ehud's action is as violent as Jael's, yet what he did is not viewed negatively. The different evaluations of a similar act bring up the second issue why many consider Jael's story a difficult one: gender. Jael's assassination of Sisera itself is contentious. Add to that a woman being violent, and gender boundaries are inevitably pushed.<sup>298</sup> Ancient and some modern readers tend to look at violence differently when it is done by men than when it is done by a woman. Certainly in order to judge a particular use of violence one needs to take into consideration the situation in which the violence takes place.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Gale A. Yee, "By the Hand of a Women," 100.

<sup>299</sup> Ignacio Ellacuría, "Liberation Theology and Socio-Historical Change in Latin America," in *Towards a Society that Serves its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador's Murdered Jesuits*, ed. by John Haseett and Hugh Lacey (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 39.



Jael finds herself in a situation not of her making: Sisera comes to her. She knows that Sisera is the enemy of the Israelites, her people, and she uses the opportunity to *resolver* in the only way possible, given the situation in which she is: she kills him.

Jael, like most Cubans living on the island, has to *resolver* her particular situation by setting aside some of the values of her culture. For instance, Jael is accused of having violated the codes of hospitality. However, from the perspective of *resolver*, she is facing up to the situation at hand by deciding that the life of her people and of herself justify overriding some of her other values. My reading of the Jael story through the lens of *resolviendo* allows me to see how this character survived.

How is this stance of *resolver* conveyed literarily? We look first at how the narrator describes what Jael does. He describes her actions in a matter-of-fact way. He never praises Jael for what she has accomplished, nor does he suggest that she deserves some kind of recognition. He simply describes how she assassinates Sisera, without evaluating her actions. Further, the narrator never makes any judgment about Jael as a person or about what she does. Maybe Jael was not important because she was a woman. Perhaps his lack of praise for Jael has to do with the fact that the narrator considered what Jael did as “ordinary,” something she did to *resolver* – a way of looking at life and acting that was not foreign to the people of her time and, particularly to Jael.

Jael’s killing Sisera was perhaps not that unusual for her society. In the perspective of Deuteronomistic History we know that the Book of Judges deals with a highly violent period in the history of the Israelites. Since Sisera arrives on foot fleeing from where he had battled Barak, it is not unreasonable to think that the camp where Jael lived was near the battlefield and that she knew the reasons for the fighting that was

raging nearby. It is possible that Jael and others in her camps may have encountered other warriors fleeing from that battle and coming into their camps looking for protection, lodging, and food. Maybe this is why Jael was not surprised to see Sisera approaching her tent. Maybe he was not the first warrior she had received in her tent, either because she wanted to or because the warrior obliged her. Perhaps receiving Sisera in her tent was part of the daily events that she and others in her camp had to deal with in order to *resolver*. Another possible scenario is that Heber was a prominent leader and Jael's tent was bigger, which it would have attracted the interest of Sisera.<sup>300</sup>

*Resolver* is about using what is at hand to get what one needs to survive and provide for oneself and the people for whom one is responsible. And this is what we see Jael doing in this story. She does nothing extraordinary and, again, maybe that is why Sisera feels so safe with her. Nothing that she says or does makes the reader think that she planned her actions carefully or that she thought they were in any way extraordinary. She does not pray to YHWH for protection or guidance as Judith did (Jdt 9). She does not “announce” what she is about to do the way Judith announced her plans to the elders of the city (Jdt 8:32-34). Jael does not even mention YHWH as Deborah earlier does (Jdg 4:9).

At first, no one is aware that she has killed Sisera. Once Barak arrives in the camp, Jael invites him to enter her tent so he can identify Sisera's body. Like the narrator – the only other person in the story who “knows” what Jael has done -- after seeing Sisera's body, Barak has nothing to say. He does not praise Jael nor thank her. Like the narrator, Barak remains silent, passing no judgment on Jael's action. Barak's and the

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<sup>300</sup> I appreciate Dr. Perdue's insights on this regard.

narrator's silence about Jael's doings could well be read as their acknowledgment that she did what she had to do, that she *resolver* or took care of things in the simplest and most effective way she could.<sup>301</sup> What Jael did, according to the way the narrator and Barak behave in the story, seems an ordinary thing: eliminating people who threaten the well-being of the community. To them, there is therefore nothing unusual to acknowledge.<sup>302</sup> Jael was simply *resolviendo*.

Jael uses Sisera's coming to her tent as an opportunity to *resolver*, to kill the person who has been oppressing the Israelites. Whether Jael welcomes Sisera because of the hospitality code of her time that demanded her to offer him lodging, food and protection, or whether she seduces him to get him to come into her tent, either way she uses what were the customs of her society to *resolver*. She acts according to the rules of hospitality-- covering him, giving him milk to drink—in order to be able to do what she wants or rather needs to do, and that is to kill him.

Jael even dares to use a priestly formula (Num 21:34; Deut 3:2) – have no fear – to *resolver*, to make Sisera trust her and feel relaxed enough to fall asleep. Then Jael *resuelve* with what she has at hand, she kills with the instruments that are usually found in any tent: pegs to secure the tent and a hammer to drive the pegs into the ground. She does not go looking for a sword to kill Sisera. She uses common things to do what she has to do to *resolver*. Jael's use of everyday life tools for *resolver* resembles the story of

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<sup>301</sup> Of course this could also be read from a feminist perspective as men ignoring a woman but I do not believe the text presents itself to the reader this way.

<sup>302</sup> Deborah is the only person in the chapter with Jael's story who mentions that YHWH will deliver the enemy by the hand of a woman, referring to Jael.

David and Goliath in the Hebrew Bible where David uses what he has at hand in order to survive like killing Goliath with a sling and river stones (1 Sam 17:48-51).

The way in which Jael uses time to fulfill her plans constitutes a way of *resolver*. She does not precipitate her plans. *Resolver* is about staying calm, waiting for the right moment. Jael does not appear arguing with Sisera or even trying to convince him. She knows what to say and what she is not supposed to say. She speaks when it is necessary, like at the beginning of the story. Jael also recognizes the time to remain silent, like when she obeys Sisera's order of standing at the tent's front door and protecting him.

After Jael kills Sisera and Barak finds his body in her tent, the narrator takes over the time and space that Jael had controlled up to then and puts her actions in a wider perspective. Regardless of the fact that I think he does so in a way that ignores Jael, at the end of the chapter the narrator capitalizes on the day in which Jael *resolvió* for herself and her people. The narrator tells us that “*on that day*” YHWH destroyed king Jabin. That day is an important day because of what Jael did. Even if the narrator does not mention Jael by name, the fact remains that Jabin may have continued to oppress the Israelites, if Jael had not killed his general Sisera. She is the liberator of her people.

Jael's *resolver* can be seen as an isolated act of one person *resolviendo*. However, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, YHWH is a God who uses simple people and their small and simple actions and turns them into wonderful and marvelous deeds (Gen 39:1-40; Exod 1; Jdt). Jael's act of *resolver*, her choosing life for herself and consequently for her people, becomes, in YHWH's eyes and for YHWH's purpose, an act that brings about the salvation of her people.

## Chapter 4

### Judges 10:6-12:7: The Story of Jephthah and His Daughter

#### Summary of the narrative

Beginning in Chapter 10:6-18, the story of Jephthah (Judg 11-12:7) is another which describes a situation of crisis and its resolution, as striking as it is. The region of Gilead with its main city of Mizpah, the place from which Jephthah was expelled along with the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim, is under the attack from the Ammonites. This situation constitutes the backdrop for the story of Jephthah and his daughter. The Deuteronomistic author<sup>303</sup> describes the political instability that permeated Israel prior to the time of the monarchy. Repeatedly new judges rose, but both the people and the judges failed to fulfill God's demands. Earlier versions of the book of Judges were shaped prior to the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.E. but this understanding of the political arena reflects the work of the Deuteronomistic History (DH), a theological reform guided by King Josiah around 622 B.C.E. The narrator's style, called Deuteronomist (D) was "sermonic and hortatory, and seems to have been cultivated in the periodic public assemblies for celebrating the renewal of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel."<sup>304</sup> We read repeatedly that "*the Israelites again did evil in the sight of the YHWH.*" As a result of their failure, YHWH delivers the people into the hands of the enemies (v.7). Then, the people cry out to God for help and salvation and

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<sup>303</sup> For a discussion on the insertion of the Jephthah's story see Thomas Römer, "Why would the Deuteronomists Tell about the Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter?," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 77 (1998) 27-38.

<sup>304</sup> Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 138.

God provides a deliverer (judge) to save them. This is the cycle that is found again and again in the book of Judges.

However, Chapter 10: 11-18 introduces a new divine response to the Israelites' outcry. God is tired of delivering them from their enemies and clearly states that because of their unfaithfulness and their worship of other gods, this time God will not save them. YHWH incites the people to cry out to their idols to save them (10:14), and though the people do repent and abandon their idols, YHWH does not save them. The two opposing armies assemble; the Ammonites gather in Gilead while the Israelites encamp in Mizpah.

It is into this tumultuous political arena that Jephthah comes. Chapter 11 informs us that he is a mighty warrior, a son of a prostitute, a son of the other woman, and a son of a man named Gilead who had previously sired other sons with another wife.<sup>305</sup> We also learn that Jephthah's stepbrother rejected him and expelled him from town. Declared an outcast by his half-brothers who exclude him from having a share in their father's property, Jephthah leaves town and settles in the country of Tob **טוב** *good*. Much later, when they find themselves in grave danger, the elders of Gilead talk with Jephthah about becoming their military leader and fighting the Ammonites. Jephthah, reminding them how they had rejected him earlier, now questions their intentions in wanting him to save them from their troubles. The elders acknowledge that he is their only help. In return for his successful service they promise to make him their commander-in-chief. Jephthah accepts the elders' deal and becomes their chief. Verses 12-28 record the negotiation process via messengers between Jephthah and the king of the Ammonites. He makes

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<sup>305</sup> Jephthah's father bears the same name Gilead as one of the tribes. This constitutes an example of a patronymic founder of a tribe.

several diplomatic attempts to resolve the differences between Israel and Ammon, but everything fails and war is imminent. Verse 29 records that the spirit of YHWH יְהוָה came upon Jephthah and he made a vow to God that if he delivers the Israelites from the hands of the Ammonites, Jephthah will offer to YHWH “whatever” or “whoever” first comes out of his house to meet him on his return.<sup>306</sup> Jephthah wins the battle against the Ammonites and, returning to his town in Mizpah, is received by his only child, his unnamed daughter. Seeing her coming out of the house, he laments and tears his clothes. Instead of blaming himself for the vow he has made to God, Jephthah blames his daughter. She does not persuade his father to take back the vow, but accepts her fate. The only thing she requests from her father is permission to go to the mountains with her friends to grieve her virginity. After two months Jephthah’s daughter returns to her father and he fulfills his vow. As for Jephthah, he fights with the Ephraimites and judges Israel for six years until he dies and is buried in his home town of Gilead.

The story of Jephthah has traditionally been read as the tragedy that Jephthah’s daughter endures as a consequence of a foolish vow her father makes to God.<sup>307</sup> Jephthah

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<sup>306</sup> Later in this chapter I analyze the vow Jephthah makes to God.

<sup>307</sup> Jephthah’s story has been widely interpreted throughout history to the present day. In his book *Wrestling with Textual Violence: The Jephthah Narrative in Antiquity and Modernity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006) Mikael Sjöberg establishes a comparison of six versions of the Jephthah’s story including the biblical text in the book of Judges, the Jewish telling in Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum* (first century C.E), Josephus’s report in his *Jewish Antiquities* also from the first century B.E, Handel’s oratorio *Jephthah* (1751), the novel *A Mighty Man of Valour* (1939) by British author E.L Grant Watson, and the short story by Amos Oz, *Upon this Evil Earth* written in 1981. For a discussion on how this biblical story is remembered by historians (Origen, Ambrose, Augustine, Abelard) and in the later Middle Ages and Reformation, see John L. Thompson, “Sacrificing Jephthah’s Daughter: The Life and Death of a Father’s Only-Begotten,” 33-47.

is seen as a calculating and irresponsible parent who bargains with God in making an unthinkable sacrifice as a token for the victory and salvation of the Israelites. The daughter, in contrast, is seen as a poor little victim who stoically accepts her father's vow to God. She accepts her imminent death, her only request of her father being to let her go to the mountains with her female companions so that she may grieve over her virginity.<sup>308</sup>

This reading of the Jephthah narrative is accurate and legitimate, because it denounces the violence that a virgin daughter suffers at the hands of her own father. Jephthah is criticized as a man who does not think through the implications of the vow he makes to YHWH. As much I agree with this traditional interpretation of the story, I also have my own questions of the text, my own way of reading the story. Broadly speaking, I believe that the narrative of Jephthah has been read in an unbalanced way: the father as bad, the daughter as defenseless.

The story of Jephthah is complex and deserves the most complete reading possible. Such a reading will ask questions of the larger picture of the events in the narrative. Who is Jephthah? What is his family history? How did things become so bad for him that he acts as he does? And what was the status of Jephthah's daughter? Did she really accept piously the blame her father attributes to her? Was she aware of the vow her father made in Mizpah? Did she really ask or demand her father's permission to go to the mountains with her female friends? This chapter explores these questions and tries to

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<sup>308</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 93-116; Cheryl Exum, "The Tragic Vision and Biblical Narrative: The Case of Jephthah," in *Signs and Wonders: Biblical Texts in Literary Focus*, ed. Cheryl J. Exum (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 59-83.



surface a more complete reading of the text that illuminates the choices Jephthah and his daughter make, without immediately determining or judging how good or bad those choices are.

Once again, I ask these questions of the text through the lens of *resolviendo*, or survival. Jephthah and his daughter face limit situations that force them to act in ways that will allow them to survive.

Characters' social status and their relationships to one another

Jephthah's stepbrothers, Jephthah's messengers, the elders of Gilead, the daughter's companions and God

These are the characters that appear in chapter 11. Some are flat characters: Jephthah's stepbrothers, the elders of Gilead, and Jephthah's messengers. Round characters are Jephthah and his daughter. There are also Jephthah's stepbrothers (11:2) who are mentioned as the sons of Gilead, Jephthah's father with another wife. Although the half-brothers appear only in this verse, they play an important role in the narrative. Their words depict them as mean: "...*they cast out Jephthah and they said to him: 'you shall not inherit in our father's house for you are the son of another woman'*"(v.2). This limited information defines aspects of his family history that I believe later inform Jephthah's life. Jephthah decides to leave and settle down in a different town, namely Tob (v.3). Jephthah's stepbrothers may be seen as round characters in the sense that they show their emotions. However, this fact alone does not make them round characters. Their interaction with Jephthah is limited to v.3 and they disappear from the story. They are agents in the narrative because they move the story forward influencing Jephthah to

leave his home and move forward with his life, but they are not well-rounded characters. The messengers that appear in Chapter 11:12-26 are inserted in the story as agents used by Jephthah to negotiate a political situation with the king of Ammon. They are the spokespersons for Jephthah as he faces a military context resolved not with diplomacy but with war. It is likely that Jephthah communicates with the king of Ammon through messengers by using some sort of scribal battle report typically used to provide a written account of events in which Israelites defined their territorial holdings.<sup>309</sup>

The elders of Gilead appear in Chapter 11: 5-11 talking with Jephthah. Verse 5 recalls how, when the Ammonites attacked Israel in the area where Gilead was located, the elders of Gilead went to the town of Tob looking to bring Jephthah back to Gilead: *“And when the people of Ammon made war against Israel the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. And they said to Jephthah ‘come and be a leader for us that we may fight the people of Ammon.’”* They remember Jephthah when they need him,<sup>310</sup> i. e., in their time of political trouble. They ask him to be their military commander. This was a temporary position, which demands that Jephthah submit himself to the authority of the elders of the town (Josh 10:24; Isa 22:3; Dan 11:18).<sup>311</sup> Elders played an important role in tribal societies. They were typically heads of prominent households and served as leaders who judged and decided on legal cases of their fellow

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<sup>309</sup> John Van Seters, “The Conquest of Sihon’s Kingdom” A Literary Examination,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91 (1972): 186-89. See also David. M Gunn, “The Battle Report: Oral or Scribal Convention?” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 (1974): 513-18.

<sup>310</sup> Joseph R. Jeter, *Preaching Judges* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 92.

<sup>311</sup> Abraham Malamat, “The Period of the Judges,” in *The World History of the Jewish People*, Vol 3, ed. Benzion Netanyahu (Tel-Aviv?:Jewish History Publications Ltd, 1964), 158.

citizens (1 Sam 16:4; Zech 3:5; Ps 121:8; Ruth 4:1-2).<sup>312</sup> They were also guardians of the civil rights of less fortunate people in society who did not have any protection or a household.<sup>313</sup>

Jephthah does not accept the elders' terms; they are after all the very same people who had excluded him from Gilead but now they bargain with Jephthah, offering him the title of chief of Gilead in an exchange for his military service. He finally accepts and is made the commander in chief of Gilead.

The daughter's companions are introduced as the next characters in 11: 37. They go with Jephthah's daughter to the mountains to grieve over her virginity. They may have been mourners (Judg 11:29-40), for there are references in other biblical texts (e.g. Jer 9:17) to women who functioned as mourners of the dead in Ancient Israel. Among their tasks we find washing and anointing the body to be buried, public weeping and lament, wearing sackcloth, and ripping an outer garment, tearing off their clothes.<sup>314</sup> Verse 40 recalls that the daughters of Israel initiated the tradition of mourning Jephthah's daughter's death four days every year.<sup>315</sup> Whether this practice continued we do not know.

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<sup>312</sup> Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*. The New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2004), 119-120.

<sup>313</sup> Elizabeth Bellefontaine, "Customary Law and Chieftainship: Judicial Aspects of 2 Samuel 14:4-21," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38 (1987): 53.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid. See also Barbara B. Miller, *Women, Death, and Mourning in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean World* (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International 1994).

<sup>315</sup> Barbara Miller, *Tell it on the Mountain: The Daughter of Jephthah in Judges 11* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 11.

God is also a key character to be mentioned in the story. YHWH appears in Chapter 10: 10-16 when the Israelites try to obtain God's help in the face of their enemies. YHWH appears as someone who is angry at the Israelites for their unfaithfulness and consequently decides not to help them any longer: "*Yet, you have forsaken me and served other gods. No, I will not deliver you again.*" The Israelites recognize their infidelity to YHWH, abandon their gods, and cry out one more time to God for help, but this time YHWH does not respond to their cry. Not only that, God actually suggests the Israelites appeal to their other gods to save them from their troubles. Here YHWH can be seen as someone who is not only tired of the Israelites' infidelity but is also sarcastic in response to their pleas. God is mentioned again in Chapter 11: 9 when Jephthah tells the elders that if YHWH delivers the Ammonites to him, he will become their commander. The elders mention God as a witness of the deal they have made (v.10). In vv. 12-27 Jephthah mentions YHWH on several occasions as part of negotiations with the king of Ammon through his messengers. Here God is the deliverer of the Israelites (21) and a judge who decides the future of both the Ammonites and Israelites (27).

In v. 29 we read that the "*spirit of YHWH came upon Jephthah*" who is about to enter a war with the Ammonites. He makes a vow to YHWH (v.30) that if God delivers the Ammonites into his hands he will offer God whatever comes out of his house to greet him on his return home. After this vow God disappears from the narrative. The same YHWH who stops Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac does not appear anywhere in the narrative to stop Jephthah from sacrificing his only child, in this case a girl.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Jeter, *Preaching Judges*, 90.

## Jephthah

In Hebrew Jephthah's name means "he opens" פתח. The verbal root of his name is פתח and the verb root used to describe the vow in 11:35 and 36 is פצה. Both פתח פה and פצה פה share the same meaning, "to open the mouth." This is precisely what Jephthah does: he opens his mouth to speak of life and peace (during political negotiations with the king of Ammon), but also to speak of violence and death (when he offers a vow to God to sacrifice in a burnt offering whatever comes out of his house).<sup>317</sup>

Jephthah's social status is quickly introduced by the narrator in 11:1-2. He is equally described as a mighty warrior גִּבּוֹר חַיִּל and the son of a prostitute בֶּן־אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה. This information about his family lineage marks him as an outcast and outsider. This is not the first time the family background of a leader is mentioned. As Matthews indicates, this reference to Jephthah as the son of a prostitute "may be a repetition of the foreign and dangerous woman theme that also appears in the story of Abimelech and his mother (Judg 8:31)."<sup>318</sup> Being the son of a prostitute locates Jephthah in a marginal situation.<sup>319</sup> Jephthah's mother could have been either a prostitute or a divorced woman.<sup>320</sup> Whatever the case, prostitute, divorced woman or another woman בֶּן־אִשָּׁה אַחֵרָת as his

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<sup>317</sup> Dennis T. Olson, "Dialogues of Life and Monologues of Death: Jephthah and Jephthah's Daughter in Judges 10:6-12:7," in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. Andrew K. M. Adam (St Louis: Chalice, 2001), 44.

<sup>318</sup> Matthews, *Judges*, 117.

<sup>319</sup> For a more detailed analysis of prostitution in Ancient Israel see chapter two.

<sup>320</sup> Yair Zakovitch, "The Woman's Rights in the Biblical Law of Divorce," in *The Jewish Law Annual* 4: 40, 45.

stepbrothers say, would have been a stigma that marked not only her life, but also that of her offspring.

Jephthah's social status is also by living in Mizpah, a border place between Israel and Ammon.<sup>321</sup> Thus, he is an outsider figure twice over, socially and geographically. Twice marginalized he is town to settle down in what is probably a "good" land for him, the land of Tob.

A final aspect of Jephthah's status forms the core of this story: he is a father. In 11: 35 he is mentioned as having a daughter who is the only person who lives with him. At least the text does not mention his wife or the child's mother. Jephthah's status defines who he is. How he interacts with other people in the narrative-- the elders, the Ammonite king, and his daughter-- provide us with a much fuller picture of who he is.

The elders of Gilead go to the land of Tob looking for Jephthah. As a warrior, he seemed to be the perfect fit for the mission of saving the Israelites from the Ammonites. Jephthah tries to understand the elders' true intentions for him to become their chief despite their having expelled him from the town not long before. After some consideration, he accepts the deal and becomes the chief of Gilead. The outcast son of a prostitute is back in his own town, a hero, a leader, someone who it is hoped will by means of a military victory put an end to the political oppression of the people of Gilead. And victorious he is. However, Jephthah's victory is shadowed by a vow he makes to God that will change not only his own life but also his daughter's.

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<sup>321</sup> Boundary also serves as a literary motif, a place that can be seen as a maker that divides two worlds and realities. It is a place of encounter because it unites in one place, at the border, the realities that take place outside and inside of it. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera: the New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

## Jephthah's vow

Jephthah's vow is the turning point that decides the future of the narrative and constitutes a major point of discussion for many scholars. Tribble thinks that the vow was an act of Jephthah's unfaithfulness--meaning that after receiving the spirit of God he still does not trust God completely and sees the need to make a vow. Furthermore, Tribble insists that Jephthah's vow is a premeditated strategy he puts in place to get God's guarantee of a victory.<sup>322</sup> On the other hand, Cheryl Exum suggests that Jephthah's vow was not offered in opposition to the divine spirit, but rather under the influence of God's spirit.<sup>323</sup> For Exum the problem is not the vow in itself, but the content of it: that he will offer to YHWH whoever, whatever, or the one going forth, the one coming out **נִסְיָא** **אֲשֶׁר** **וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אִשָּׁר** of his house to meet him. The Hebrew term is ambivalent as to whether Jephthah was thinking of an animal<sup>324</sup> or human<sup>325</sup> offering to God. As Exum reminds us, the vow would not have been as problematic if Jephthah had offered to build an altar to God upon his victorious return from war instead of offering something or someone as a burnt offering, or if he had specified an animal sacrifice, a burnt offering of, say, a yoke of oxen.

Dennis Olson offers a different perspective, one with which I agree. Regardless of whether Jephthah was or was not under the influence of the spirit of YHWH when he

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<sup>322</sup> Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 93-116

<sup>323</sup> Cheryl Exum, "The Tragic Vision," 66-67.

<sup>324</sup> Boling, *Judges*, 208.

<sup>325</sup> G.F Moore, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1895), 299.

made the vow to God, Olson suggests Jephthah misuses his vow “as a bribe or leverage to influence the divine judge in the context of a court case.”<sup>326</sup> One has to remember that Jephthah uses the language of court battle in his negotiation with the Ammonites. In this context Jephthah mentions God’s presence as the judge who will decide the course of future events. Deuteronomy’s laws in 16:19 establish that it is forbidden to bribe or give gifts to judges to influence their court decisions.

The basic understanding of a vow נדר is a Hebrew conditional contact that allows a worshipper to make with the deity.<sup>327</sup> In the Hebrew Bible the נדר appears a total of 91 times. The term appears 31 times used in the *qal active* form and 60 times (to vow) as masculine noun (a vow).<sup>328</sup> Vows are conditional because the worshipper supplicates the deity or deities with the following condition: if, *and only if*, you do something for me, then, I will do something for you.<sup>329</sup>

Vows are made by individuals.<sup>330</sup> Examples can be found throughout the Hebrew Bible in various bodies of literature. In the pre-exilic sources of the Hebrew Bible one

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<sup>326</sup> Olson, “Dialogues of Life,” 49.

<sup>327</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Vows and the ‘Popular Religious Groups’ of Ancient Israel: A Philological and Sociological Inquiry* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1996), 41.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid. See also the work of C.A. Keller, “נדר ndr geloden,” in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament* (Stuttgart Verlag W. Kohlhammer), 39; and F. Andersen and D. Forbes, *The Vocabulary of the Old Testament* (Roma: Pontificio Instituto Bíblico, 1989), 373-374.

<sup>329</sup> Tony W. Cartledge, *Vows in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 415.

<sup>330</sup> Berlinerblau does not exclude the possibility that a group of individuals could have offered communal vows in the Hebrew Bible, but he indicates that evidences of such practices are lacking in the biblical records. Berlinerblau, *The Vows and the ‘Popular Religious Groups,’* 57.



can find Jacob's vow in Gen 28:30, Hannah's vow in 1 Sam 1:11, Jephthah's vow in Judg 11:30, and Absalom's vow in 2 Sam 15:7. There are texts within the prophetic literature that also indicates the use of individual vows (Mal 1:14; Isa 19:21; Jer 44:15; Nah 1:14; and Jonah 1:16) while wisdom literature and psalms also offer their own texts regarding personal vows (Prov 7:14, Eccl 5:1-6; Pss 22:26; 50:14, among other texts).<sup>331</sup>

### Jephthah's Daughter

Jephthah's daughter appears for first time in v.36. She is a virgin daughter. What did this description entail in ancient Israel, and how does it help us understand who the daughter is and what she does?

Women in ancient Israel before being wives or mothers were virgin daughters or brides. If mothers or wives were seen from a more maternal perspective, daughters and brides were seen from an erotic one. There are different terms in the Hebrew language that help us see the range of classification of young women ready for marriage and sex: *bētûlâ* "virgin," *'almâ* "young woman," "maiden," *kallâ* "bride," or as we find in ancient Near Eastern poetry *'āhôt* "sister" (Song 4:9).<sup>332</sup>

Virgin daughters were raised with the idea that at a certain point in their life they would marry and join the family of the husband. Their sexuality belonged to their fathers, but once married they became completely linked to the husband's household and placed under his authority. Daughters shared the family household tasks (Gen 24:15; 29:9). They were prepared from a young age to assume the responsibilities of a household. Parents,

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 48-57.

<sup>332</sup> Bird, "Women (Old Testament)," 61.

particularly fathers, had the power to control their children's lives. The father could sell the daughter into bondage (Exod 21:7) or allow her to be seized by creditors for the payment of some parental debt (2 Kgs 4:1).

Some passages in the Hebrew Bible illuminate how virgin daughters and brides were perceived. The bride of the Song of Songs is described as a young wife or unmarried woman. She is the subject of male attraction (Song 4). Although the sexuality of daughter and brides in ancient Israel was strongly guarded by the males of the families prior to their marriage (Deut 22:13-21), The Song of Songs is an exceptional text where sex is freely given and sought. In other cases, prostitutes were also free to seek and have sexual relationships, but such activities were not well regarded by society at large.

In Judg 11:39 the tragedy of Jephthah's daughter presents a young unmarried daughter<sup>333</sup> who is given in sacrifice by her own father after he makes a rash vow to God. Feminist scholars debate the status of Jephthah's daughter as an unmarried woman. Anne Tapp considers her virginity as an expression of her powerlessness, arguing that she is available for exchange because she is unmarried.<sup>334</sup> Other scholars like Mieke Bal and Peggy Day propose that Jephthah's daughter is not simply a virgin, but a nubile young woman who is going through a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood.<sup>335</sup> Cheryl

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<sup>333</sup> Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, 46-49.

<sup>334</sup> Anne Michele Tapp, "An Ideology of Expendability: Virgin Daughter Sacrifice in Genesis 9: 1-11, Judges 11: 30-39 and 19: 22-26," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 157-174.

<sup>335</sup> Mieke Bal, "Between Altar and Wondering Rock: Toward a Feminist Philology," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, 213-220; Peggy L. Day, "From the Child is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," in *Gender and Difference*, 60. For more on rite passages see Beth Gerstein,

Exum presents a different view of the daughter, stating that indeed she was likely to be a virgin and that v.39 ends with a proclamation of such status.<sup>336</sup> I believe Jephthah's daughter is an unmarried young woman who goes to the mountains with her friends to grieve over her virginity בְּתוּלִים as a way of surviving, of dealing with her reality.<sup>337</sup>

Jephthah's daughter is unnamed. She appears for first time in 11:34 coming out of her father's house dancing and celebrating his safe return from the battlefield and the victory over the Ammonites. This celebration reflects the Song of Miriam in Exod. 15, an ancient victory dance and song (cf. 1 Sam 8:6-7). She greets her father's party with "timbrels and with dances." However, her joyful welcome turns into tragedy when her father tears his clothes and laments what her daughter has done by being the first one to come out of the house to greet him. He says to her: "*alas, my daughter: you have brought me very low and you have become the cause of trouble for me because I have opened my mouth to YHWH and I cannot return it (v.35).*" Jephthah blames her for the situation in which he is immersed and for a vow that he cannot take back. The narrative limits her speech to only two verses, 36 and 37, which give the reader an impression of her personality. In v.36 she responds to her father's accusation, saying: "*My father, you have opened your mouth to YHWH. Do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth now that YHWH has worked for you revenge on your enemies from the Ammonites*

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"A Ritual Processed: A Look at Judges 11:40," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, 175-93. Here Gerstein applies narratology to the story of Jephthah's daughter where women of Israel commemorate her death.

<sup>336</sup> Cheryl J. Exum, "Murder they Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 43 (1989) 19-39.

<sup>337</sup> I will further explore this idea when I present my reading of the story through the lens of *resolviendo*.

*people.*” This response may come across as a pious and gentle acceptance of the vow her father made to God, but a closer analysis of the Hebrew reveals a much stronger reaction on the daughter’s part.

Jephthah’s blame on the daughter and her defense also serve as a lament where father and daughter join in the acknowledgment of what has just happened. Father and daughter can be seen as worshipping God, although in different ways. The father states he has made a vow to God which is impossible to take back while the daughter assures the father that he can do with her according to what he has promised to God.<sup>338</sup>

She may be seen as someone affectionate when calling Jephthah “my father,” but she masters a strong and subtle response to her father by using the Hebrew preposition for “you” six times as part of the verb conjugations. The daughter says to Jephthah: *you* have opened *your* mouth; do to me according to what has gone out of *your* mouth; God has worked for *you* to avenge *your* enemies. Jephthah’s daughter fights back; basically she tells him, “Do not put the blame on me because this is something *you* did, not me.” It is *your* vow (you opened the mouth to YHWH), *your* revenge, and *your* enemies.<sup>339</sup>

Reading the story from this perspective, I see not a victim daughter, but a strong woman

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<sup>338</sup> This laments resembles the psalms of laments found in the Psalter. They can be classified as individuals, communal, and royals. There are also lament psalms for those who have been wrongly accused and lament psalms for those who are seriously ill. Jephthah’s lament resonates with individual laments psalms (Pss 3-7; 9/10; 13; 17; 22; 25-28; 31 among others) where the person includes a statement about the distress she or he is suffering (Ps. 54:3). Lament psalms also function as a catharsis allowing the person to externalize his or her suffering or distress. See J. Day, *Psalms* (England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

<sup>339</sup> Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Spoiled Child: A Fresh Look at Jephthah’s Daughter,” in *Prooftexts* 17 (1997): 285.

with a mind of her own fighting back at the male authority that rules over her life: her own father.

But the daughter's speech does not end with her response to her father. She takes it a step further. In v. 37 she says again: "my father" and then "*let be done for me this thing: let me alone two months that I may go to the mountains and bewail my virginity with my companions.*" Her request is well constructed. The mountains are the place of refuge for women's rituals designed to shake off the chains, at least symbolically, of male power.<sup>340</sup> She asks her father, "*let be done for me this thing* דָּבָר." She is not direct with her father, but uses the word דָּבָר (thing), which is abstract and unspecific. She is clever in preparing her request to her father, getting him to accept something without yet letting on what it is. Once she lays out the foundation of her discourse she demands--not requests-- that her father let her go to the mountains for two months. She does not use the Hebrew particle of entreaty נָא "please," or "I pray thee." customary when asking a favor, especially from a male figure who has authority over her.<sup>341</sup> The Hebrew verb דָּפַח for "relax" and also "withdraw" is used in the imperative Hiphil form of the verb. She does not behave as a daughter who is completely obedient to her father without questioning his decision or defending herself. She breaks with societal expectations and

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<sup>340</sup> A similar example can be found in Greek mythology where the Maenads, the female worshipers of Dionysus, god of wine, mystery, and their devouring of Pentheus, among them his own mother. See David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Jane Ellen Harrison, "The Maenads" in *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: University Press, 1903).

<sup>341</sup> Reis, "Spoiled Child," 285.

also with the ritual that if continued, becomes a symbolic way of throwing off male shackles.

Jephthah's daughter shows agency in the text. From a perspective of *resolviendo* in Cuba I can see how her actions are shaped by a sense of survival. She is not the passive daughter who accepts that her father will sacrifice her. There is more to the story when looked at through this lens of survival. To see this clearly, we have to question the text using a feminist hermeneutic of suspicion,<sup>342</sup> raising concerns about the gaps and silences in the text that presumably show only a limited picture of women's realities. The narrator has left many gaps in the story, and these allow one to hazard variant readings of the text. One of the aspects we are not told about by the narrator is where Jephthah utters his vow. In Chapter 10: 29 we are informed that "*the spirit of the YHWH*" came to him and he marched through Gilead and Manasseh, passing Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he crossed over to the Ammonites." It is commonly understood that Jephthah was at Mizpah, his hometown, when he made the vow.<sup>343</sup> Did he make it just in front of the elders or in front of the whole town of Gilead that had chosen him as their commander in chief? Likely so if this vow was a public ritual made in front of the people. Were women present? Was his daughter present? Did she know about the vow? And if not, would others in the village have made the daughter aware of the vow and advise her not to come out of the house, knowing that she was probably the only person who lived with him?<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*.

<sup>343</sup> Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 127

My suspicion is that Jephthah's daughter knew very well about the vow her father had made.<sup>345</sup> This bold assertion implies that she deliberately came out of the house to greet him<sup>346</sup> knowing that she would be the "burnt offering" to God that her father has promised. It is outrageous to believe that Jephthah's daughter wanted to be sacrificed to God, but I think she knew about the vow and took this as an opportunity to free herself from something worse. She uses the situation to break out of a patriarchal system of which she did not want to be a part. What choices did she have as a woman in her society? She is not in charge of her life or her sexuality: her father is. She belongs to him until she is given in marriage, at which point she joins her husband's house (Gen 24:4) and becomes her husband's property. He in turn will rule over her life and body (Deut 22:13-21). Once married, what choices does she have? Not many. She will hope to bear children. Being a mother will be the ultimate goal that will define who she is and who she can become. Perhaps Jephthah's daughter did not want that choice for herself. Although being a mother was greatly appreciated in that society and was probably the dream of most women at that time, this does not necessarily mean that she wanted that for herself. If that were so, then what choices does she have in a patriarchal system that has already established what is available and unavailable to women at that time? How can she break out of a system of which she wants no part?

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<sup>344</sup> It is assumed Jephthah lives by himself with his daughter since the text mentions he did not have any other children. However, it does not say whether he had a wife living with him.

<sup>345</sup> Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 127.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

I suggest that breaking through the vow was a way of escaping the system, which she had no other way of doing. Risking to do something different with her life would give her the chance to flee the cycle of violence in which she is expected to participate—not the violence of being offered in sacrifice to God, a male God, but the perpetuated and perennial violence of being offered to males, to her father and then to a husband. The system of violence she tries to break out of is beyond the immediate and particular reality of the vow her father has made to God. Her choice is about saying no to a larger system that regulates her life, her body, her sexuality, her inner being, her destiny, and a future that she does not want for her children and maybe particularly for female children that she might bear. Jephthah's daughter's demand to her father to let her go to the mountains to bewail בְּכָה her virginity בְּתוּלִים means that she is aware she will not be given in marriage and bear children as had been expected. Thus, she weeps over her virginity as if she were going to be given in marriage, but the grieving is because she will be sacrificed,<sup>347</sup> and is thus a way of coping with her death, not her marriage.

## Plot, Narrator, Time, and Space in the Story

### Plot

In the story of Jephthah such a plot is laid out beginning in Chapter 10:6 with the introduction of the political situation that the Israelites and people from Gilead were facing. This brief introduction moves the plot further along allowing us to understand the introduction of the character of Jephthah in Chapter 11. Little information in this chapter

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<sup>347</sup> See Peggy Day, "From the Child is Born the Woman: The Story of Jephthah's Daughter," 58-74. Here Day does a provocative cross-cultural analysis of ancient Greek rituals of female adolescence and compares them with the "mourning" of women in the story of Jephthah's daughter.



guides the narrative: we are informed that Jephthah is the son of a Gilead and a prostitute. We also know of the existence of stepbrothers who reject him and exclude him from inheriting any property from their father's estate. This detail of the story moves the plot even further along by forcing Jephthah to leave his house and town and settle down in the land of Tob.

The story has already been told above: political threats from the Ammonites, the elders' persuasion of Jephthah to be their commander-in-chief, the vow to God that shapes the plot of this story and constitutes the central point of tension in the plot; the victory, the greeting, the retreat to the mountains, the carrying out of the vow.

#### Narrator

The story of Jephthah as David Marcus indicates contains "ambiguities consciously devised by the narrator."<sup>348</sup> As mentioned before, the book of Judges is shaped by the work of an earlier editor or narrator. It is likely that the early narrator or editor had a more radical view of the Jephthah's story than that of the Deuteronomistic Historian (DH).<sup>349</sup> This is why the story is not only open to many readings but also allows the reader to draw varying conclusions.<sup>350</sup> Chapter 10: 1-5 introduces two minor judges: Tola and Jair from Gilead, the same town as Jephthah. The information the narrator provides about these judges is limited to their name, place of precedence (tribe,

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<sup>348</sup> David Marcus, *Jephthah and his Vow* (Texas: Texas Tech Press, 1986), 8-9.

<sup>349</sup> For more on the form-critical and traditio-historical study of the Jephthah's cycle see the works of Richter, Wolfgang, "Die Überlieferungen um Jehtah, Ri. 10, 17-12:6," in *Biblica* 47 (1966): 48-556. For a literary study of Jephthah's narrative see Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomistic*, 176-181.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*

clan or region), the years they judge, their death notice, place of burial, and numbers of children they had.<sup>351</sup>

In v.6 the narrator introduces the familiar statement that runs throughout the book of Judges “*the people of Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the YHWH.*” They were destroyed and again they cried out to God. This time things are different because YHWH is tired of saving the Israelites over and over again when they still remain unfaithful to him. The narrator interrupts the note on the political situation in 10:17 to introduce Jephthah in Chapter 11. He joins the following pieces of information. First, he inserts the first vow Jephthah makes to YHWH: “*And Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, “If you take me back to fight with the Ammonites and YHWH gives them over to me, I will be your head.*” At this point we are not told that Jephthah has a daughter. Neither is there any intimation of what or who may be sacrificed to God in fulfillment of the vow.

Second, the narrator introduces Jephthah’s daughter in v. 36, but he does not mention Jephthah’s daughter’s name.<sup>352</sup> We are told, however, that she is the only child he has “*since he did not have any other son or daughter.*” We do not know whether his daughter was the only person who lived with Jephthah. The narrator does not tell us whether Jephthah had a wife or who was the mother of his child. Last, the narrator does not mention details of the daughter’s sacrifice. Whether she was sacrificed or not has been a continuing point of discussion for some scholars.

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<sup>351</sup> Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 112-113.

<sup>352</sup> The fact that Jephthah’s daughter is not mentioned could be due to a more radical view in the earlier narrative. In that way the Deuteronomistic History editor wishes to regard both her and the festival of lament in her honor as illegitimate.

The narrator uses the features of time and space as an aid to provide a more complete picture of the characters.

## Time

The use of the Hebrew in this narrative allows me to see how time is used by the characters. Throughout the narrative we find the use of the *waw consecutive* (ו) as a connector to indicate the succession of events, i.e after some time וַיְהִי מִיָּמִים or “*and it happened after from some days*” that the Ammonites and the Israelites went to war. Time progresses in vv. 5 - 11 when Jephthah and the elders of Gilead talk. Throughout these verses the presence of the *waw consecutive* integrated into the Hebrew verbs guides the bargaining process between the elders and Jephthah. They want Jephthah to return to Gilead to be their military chief: “*and they said to Jephthah come and be our leader.*” Before Jephthah accepts the offer, he takes “his time” to deal with their proposition. He reminds the elders that they were the same people who hated him and drove him out of the town in the past. He asks them why is it that now עַתָּה (present time) when they are in trouble they come looking for him? The elders respond to Jephthah’s questioning saying that it is precisely because they are in trouble that now עַתָּה (present time) they turn to him. The elders enumerate options they have for Jephthah. He will go back to Gilead with them, “*and*” fight with the Ammonites, “*and*” he shall become their head ראשׁ. Jephthah takes his time to listen to the elders, dialogue with them, and finally to accept the offer that he will become not their leader קָצִין but their chief, head ראשׁ a position of authority that is definitive and not as temporally limited as being a leader.

In v.34 time moves along and we learn that Jephthah has returned to his house. Here an internal time guides the sequence of events: there is a time for Jephthah to come back to his house at Mizpah, a time to see his daughter coming out of the house, a time to lament and or rend the clothes to signify that something bad has happened. Then, there is an internal time when Jephthah speaks to his daughter, blaming her for bringing distress to him by coming out of the house to greet him (v.35). After Jephthah speaks there is a time for the daughter to speak back to him. She uses time wisely in the way she phrases her speech. Starting properly *“my father,”* she continues *“you have opened your mouth to YHWH. Do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth now that YHWH has worked for you revenge on your enemies from the Ammonites people (v.37).”* She defends herself against her father’s accusation, then continues with a special request: *“let be done for me this thing, let me alone two months that I may go on the mountains and bewail my virginity with my companions (v.38).”*

Jephthah’s daughter builds an internal time in the narrative to her advantage. She first lets her father know that she is not the one to blame for coming out of the house; he is. As part of her response I also see how the daughter accepts the vow Jephthah makes, by saying, *“Do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth...”* Once she takes the time to let her father know what she thinks about the tragedy that is about to take place she proceeds to demand what she really wants from him: to go to the mountains for two months **שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים** with her friends and mourn over her virginity. As Pamela Tamarkin Reis indicates, some translations of the Bible (KJV, RSV, JPS, AB among others) include the preposition “for,” which implies that the daughter stayed at the

mountains for two consecutive months.<sup>353</sup> However, reading the passage as it appears in Hebrew without the preposition “for” actually implies that the daughter goes to the mountains with her friends twice during the course of 60 days instead of staying there for two consecutive months.<sup>354</sup> One has to remember that women at did not have the freedom to move around by themselves, particularly if they were young and unmarried as in Jephthah’s daughter’s case.

### Space

The story of Jephthah has multiple spaces: Jephthah’s family house in Gilead; the land of Tob; the battle field where he fights with the Ammonites; Jephthah’s house in Mizpah where he lives with his unnamed daughter; and the mountains where she goes to mourn with her female friends.

The house of Jephthah’s family in Gilead is indirectly mentioned in Chapter 11:2 when his half-brothers exclude Jephthah from having a share in his father property. It is both a physical place but also a symbolic place that indicates the right to have a share in his father’s property, even if not the chief portion that usually goes to the first born son of the primary wife. Jephthah settles down in the land of Tob **בְּאֶרֶץ טוֹב** a Syrian town, which is nearby and also mentioned in 2 Sam10:6,8. In 2 Sam, Tob appears as a town that is sympathetic to the Ammonites, the same people that Jephthah will eventually fight

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<sup>353</sup> Reis, “Spoiled Child,” 286-287.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

It is the scholars' belief that Jephthah makes his vow in Mizpah from where he comes.<sup>355</sup> This house in Mizpah is a crucial space that greatly shapes the story. It is the place where Jephthah and his daughter live, but I also think it constitutes a border space. Going in and out of the house is what set the boundaries between life and death in this narrative. One may think that staying home will mean life for Jephthah's daughter while going out will imply death because she becomes the offering her father will give YHWH. However, from my Cuban reading of *resolviendo* it is the opposite. Staying home means death for Jephthah's daughter who instead chooses to go out, which will mean life for her. Here there is a reversal of meaning and the house marks that border between two realities. Jephthah's house also has another meaning since for his daughter it is the house of her father, a place of authority, property, and belonging. This is the house to which Jephthah's daughter belongs. It is the place where her life is controlled every day by her father. It is also the house to which the daughter returns after mourning her virginity with her female companions at the mountains, after which she is presumably sacrificed.

The mountains in verse 37 and 38 are mentioned as the space to which Jephthah's daughter demands her father let her go to mourn her virginity. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, mountains are symbolic places, places for God's revelation and for receiving God's laws (Exod 24). However, here mountains have a different meaning. For the daughter, going to the mountains implies grieving and re-creating a memory prior to her death. She does not go to the mountains to receive God's law, but to remember who she was (her past) and grieve her present reality as she faces her imminent (future) death.

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<sup>355</sup> Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 127.

Jephthah's daughter asks her father's permission that she may go down on the mountains **וַיֵּרְדֵתִי עַל-הַהָרִים**. Reis indicates that the phrase "going down on the mountains" has a symbolic but not a literal meaning in the text. It is not possible for someone to go down on the mountains, but up.<sup>356</sup> The symbolic explanation she gives for the daughter to go down on the mountain is that she probably went to weep in front of other gods like the children of Israel go up to the mountains to mourn before YHWH.<sup>357</sup> According to Reis the daughter probably hoped that the other gods would intervene in the vow that her father does not take back. I think a further analysis that explores this possibility will be necessary before drawing conclusions. At any rate, I believe the mountains become a place of weeping for the daughter, a place that plays a role in her way of dealing with her death.

Reading the text through the lens of *resolviendo*

Understanding this story through the lens of *resolviendo* means coming to grips with the fact that both Jephthah and his daughter find themselves in a bind: both are faced with the conflict of surviving and choosing, not between good or bad, but between bad and worse. The current Cuban reality presents people with this type of choice. There are many such situations of Cubans facing difficult dilemmas in their daily lives, for example, people leaving the country in makeshift boats or rafts to come to the United States. Many prefer to risk their lives and their families' lives than remain on the island.

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<sup>356</sup> Reis, "Spoiled Child," 286.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

Risking their lives on the ocean is a terrifying, awful idea, but they prefer to die in the ocean trying to escape Cuba than to die in Cuba.

Reading the narrative of Jephthah and his daughter through this lens allows us to see how both characters *resuelven*. Jephthah's actions as well as his daughter's are shaped by a sense of survival. I see that Jephthah *resuelve* by becoming the chief of Gilead and guiding the Israelites into the war against the Ammonites. Winning this war has a deep meaning for Jephthah, because it will put him back in the community that once excluded him. An element that is part of Jephthah's *resolviendo* is his negotiation with the elders of Gilead. When the elders first go looking for Jephthah they ask him to become their military leader. Jephthah argues with them, reminding them that they were the same people who hated him once. The elders accept Jephthah's challenge and make him a higher offer: to become their chief, their head. Jephthah, a marginal figure goes back to the center of his community. He moves from being an outsider to becoming an insider, indeed a savior-hero. The one who was at the margin of the society, now moves to the center. The one who was rejected is now embraced by his people. The one who didn't belong to a community now does.

All that is understandable. What is much more difficult to come to terms with in Jephthah's *resolviendo* is the vow he makes to God. I believe he uses his vow as part of his survival strategy. He wants to be sure that he will have a place back in the community, a place that is not only offered by the elders of Gilead but also legitimized, granted by YHWH. His vow is misguided and wrong, as I suggested before, but it is a component of Jephthah's idea of being back in Gilead. His *resolver* is going to war which eventually will give him access to his community. He will do whatever he can to



accomplish that. Jephthah's violence to his daughter does not start with his vow of sacrificing her but it is an internalized violence, it is a violence of a system, a system that was violent to him and from which his social status and being an outcast constitute elements of this institutionalized system of violence that is ingrained in his personality.

Jephthah's daughter also *resuelve*. In her, I see a daughter who prefers to die by being sacrificed than to continue being part of a system that will diminish and kill her slowly. She *resuelve* by insisting that her father keep his vow<sup>358</sup> and also by using the vow to her advantage. Coming out of the house knowing that she will be offered in sacrifice to God is how she chooses what she believes is best for her. Like the Cubans leaving the island, the daughter *chooses* between the bad and the worst. For her, the worst is to continue her life as it is, being given in marriage and ultimately bearing children, and serving a patriarchal god. Her future husband, rather than she, will have control over her body and life. Facing this dilemma the unnamed daughter chooses what she thinks is the less bad option: to die. Being offered in sacrifice would have exempted her from getting married and therefore from passing from being the property of her male father to that of a male husband. Thus, in contexts like Cuba and that of Judges, dying becomes a better choice than staying alive. The subsequent ritual in honor of the unnamed daughter allows the female companions to symbolically experience her death, even if they return to a patriarchal society afterward.

The daughter's *resolver* is about escaping from this system of violence, to break through, do something outrageous and different that will allow her to find life even if it is through death. The unnamed daughter offers insights to the notion of *resolviendo* because

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<sup>358</sup> Matthews, *Judges*, 127. For other biblical texts that deal with the inviolability of a vow see Num 30:2-5 and Deut 23:22-25.

she reminds us that survival is about how to deal with a current reality, but also about being able to move beyond the present situation. It is about how to transcend what is in front of us, how to break through a system already in place that has decided for others what is available and unavailable to them.

For Jephthah's daughter another way of *resolver* is to mourn and grieve along with her female friends. Jephthah's daughter *resuelve*, takes agency when she knows her death is imminent. Mourning becomes an act of re-creating memory; memory becomes praxis, a praxis of mourning to be carried out by future generations of other women. She lives fully the present, the time she has left. Even though she chooses to die, that does not mean she is joyful about it. It is the choice she makes; she no doubt wishes she had other choices, but she chooses what she seems to be the least bad among her options. Just as it is her choice to make, so too she chooses not to process her grief with her father. She implies she will obey his decision. However, the space for grief is not at the house nor in the local high place for the clan/tribe, but in the mountains, a space set apart for her and her friends. What is also interesting about this aspect of her surviving, is that once she knows she is going to die, even how she responds to that reality becomes an act of surviving it, rather than being defeated by the thought of death. She remains, in some limited sense, in control of her response to death. Thus, Jephthah and his daughter *resuelven* in different ways; Jephthah's *resolviendo* and ultimate goal is to be accepted back into the community and oppressive system. For his daughter, however, *resolver* is about escaping that oppressive system altogether, and a rejection of a patriarchal god.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> I am grateful to my friend and mentor Dr. Angela Bauer-Levesque for this insight and her feedback throughout this project.

I have offered an alternative reading of the Jephthah narrative shaped by the notion of *resolviendo*. Although I tried to achieve a balanced reading of the passage, I am aware that the culture that permeates the ancient texts is not balanced. Instead of reconstructing this unnamed daughter's story and that of her father I read their lives and experiences through a lens of survival that challenges the societal status quo and allows people to act and have agency over some part of their life, even if they cannot have agency over it all. Throughout my reading of this text I have brought both characters to the same level, understanding the choices they make and how they both try to survive in contexts that exclude them and oppress them.

## Conclusions

This project has sought to establish a dialogue between two narratives or “texts:” the current reality of survival that permeates the recent lives of Cubans on the island and the biblical stories of Rahab, Jael, and Jephthah and his daughter. First came a description of the continuing situation of economic hardship that Cubans have faced since the early nineties. This reality is shaped by a sense of survival, of Cubans preserving life at any cost and finding creative ways just to make it through the day. This situation (or one might say “text”) influences my hermeneutical lens and the ways in which I read other “texts,” in this case actual texts in the Hebrew Bible. With this perspective in mind, I have carefully considered the narratives of Rahab, Jael, and of Jephthah and his daughter. The conclusions presented here are the findings of this dialogue, namely, how the Cuban reality of *resolviendo* speaks to the ancient texts, and the insights offered by the ancient texts into the contemporary situation in Cuba.

Reading the story of Rahab and the spies in Joshua 2 through the lens of *resolviendo*, I note how Rahab, a woman, a foreigner, and a so-called prostitute, manages to survive in her society. Rahab uses whatever means she has at her disposal to survive. She lives by the city wall, a symbol of a literary and social boundary, and knows the particularities of life both inside and outside Jericho. Living at the border gives her a particular power; she knows how to deal with the king’s messengers who are searching for the spies and also knows the best way to protect the spies from her town’s authorities. Thus, for Rahab surviving is about moving back and forth between two places so she and her family may be secured from Jericho’s destruction in order to live another day.

This way of surviving sheds light on the struggle of people in Cuba as they strive to find ways (*resolviendo*) to live in a country where they live as both insiders and outsiders. Cuban people who do not agree with the current political system feel they are outsiders; yet they have no choice but to be insiders as well, because they live on the island and their daily life is controlled by a political system and ideology vastly different from their own beliefs. Rahab's story brings to the fore the struggles and tensions that exist for those who try to seek a better life for themselves and their families, an utopia, a place without a border or margin, a place where one can live freely and well at the very center of one's own society.

Another element crucial in Rahab's survival is that she knows how to comply with the rules her society has established. Her ultimate goal is to survive the destruction of Jericho with her family. She not only hides spies but she also confesses her beliefs in the God of the Israelites, both actions that may lead to her own destruction. The Deuteronomistic author puts on Rahab's lips a theological discourse that perpetuates the religion in YHWH as the only and true God. I see a Rahab who, in order to survive, dutifully and shrewdly repeats the ideology of the system that will save her life and her family's. Her reality is the everyday Cuban reality as well. For almost 50 years now Cubans have dutifully echoed the ideology of the current Cuban political regime, knowing that if they do not, their lives and those of their loved ones are jeopardized.

In the story of Jael, I encountered a text in which a woman uses unorthodox ways to survive. Jael violates the codes of hospitality in Ancient Israel by killing the military commander Sisera who comes to take refuge in her tent. Gender and violence are two controversial issues in the story. Jael, a woman, kills Sisera, a man. Violence is violence,

regardless of who commits it, man or woman. Throughout the Hebrew Bible we read many stories that describe violent acts performed by men. Although such acts are abhorrent, they are less censured than if they had been performed by a woman. The violent act that Jael commits has to be understood within the situation in which she finds herself. Through my lens of *resolviendo*, I see Jael as a woman in a situation not of her own making: Sisera comes to her. He is the enemy of the Israelites and of Jael's people. She uses the opportunity she has to survive, in this case killing Sisera, a dishonorable death for a military leader. It is an extreme solution for an extreme situation. Cuban people do not face the same extreme, but they too are trapped in situations not of their making, conditions that require unconventional and sometimes immoral or illegal alternatives to survive. For many Cuban people, this may mean stealing goods from their workplaces to exchange for food for their families. Like Jael, Cubans are faced with difficult moral choices if they are to make it through each day.

Jael uses deception as a way of surviving. She “cares” for Sisera by fooling him into believing he is safe in her tent. This element of deceit is rife in Cuba today. Lying has become a “normal” thing to do. In a society that is profoundly wounded and disrupted people are also wounded and dislocated. Jael's deception is a reminder that people's core values are changed in contexts of survival; extreme situations drive and perhaps even require human beings to act in ways that are not morally adequate. An important question arises for Cubans in the island. Will the deceptive aspect of *resolviendo* change when the current Cuban situation changes? Or have all the aspects that shape survival in Cuba become so internalized in people's minds that survival has reshaped the quintessential Cuban identity? I do not have answers to these questions, but I hope that as Cuban

society moves into new historical periods, the unconventional and sometimes immoral ways that now allow Cubans to survive will slowly be abandoned as no longer necessary.

Jael and Rahab's use of their bodies as a way of survival is understandable if they are is to experience hope for a future. Although both narratives do not explicitly indicate that these women had intercourse-- Rahab with the spies and Jael with Sisera-- their stories are full of sexual overtones, emphasized by the use of the Hebrew verbs for coming, entering, lying down, etc. Whatever the precise reality, Rahab and Jael engaged their corporal reality, their whole being in their struggles to survive. Here, their bodies are their allies as they, each in her own context, seduce, connive, and entice the spies and Sisera to trust them, to rely on their help.

From a perspective of *resolviendo* I have sought to challenge traditional readings of the story of Jephthah and his daughter. In limit situations, like the ones Cubans face everyday, people have to choose not typically between good or bad, but between bad and worse options. A Cuban mother who does not have any other way of providing food for her children than by selling her body finds the two choices dreadful, but chooses the bad selling of her body instead of the worse seeing her children go hungry. In the same way, Jephthah and his daughter face their conflict by choosing between bad and worse options. For Jephthah, *resolver* is about doing whatever it takes to be allowed back into his community, from being an outsider to regaining status in the same system that oppressed and excluded him, even if that involves making an ill-considered vow to God. For the unnamed daughter, *resolver* means getting out of the oppressive system that controls her life, even if it results in death. From a *resolviendo* lens Jephthah's daughter is not a poor little girl who unquestionably accepts her father's vow, but a strong woman who chooses

to use it precisely as a way of surviving, as a way of breaking through a patriarchal oppressive system. The vow is the vehicle that allows her to break with the rules of her society that have established the choices available: to become a wife and bear children. The vow is also a vehicle for the father to bargain with God and assure a place back in the community.

Jephthah's story offers insights into the perspective of survival in Cuba because it unveils how two people deal with their own conflicts in different ways. The story transcends the gender boundaries that establish expectations of women and men in ancient Israel and allows us to see Jephthah and his daughter as they are: real human beings striving to be loved, accepted, free from any oppressive system or trapped in the only system where there seems to be life.

In my project I have offered a new hermeneutical lens through which to read the narratives of Rahab, Jael, Jephthah and his daughter—and by extension, other biblical narratives. This reading is nourished by a context that shaped my life in Cuba until my arrival in the United States eight years ago. In dialoguing with the biblical narratives I have found an ancient text that relates to another “text:” the current Cuban reality. Survival has been the common thread throughout this dissertation. Survival is universal; it takes place every day, everywhere; it is not exclusive to the Cuban context. The uniqueness of *resolviendo* is not the mere act of survival, but the context that shapes the struggle. Likewise contexts of the narratives chosen in this project offer a unique flavor when dealing with issues of survival. Not every biblical text can be read through a lens of survival. One must carefully examine the context, history, culture, and other variants that influence the making of particular biblical stories. Yet the main criterion as to whether



this hermeneutic can be used is simply whether the “text” or situation being “read” is one in which people or nations are faced with a limit situation where the highest priority is preserving life at any cost. One text in the Hebrew Bible that can be read from this hermeneutical lens is the story of the midwives in Exodus 1 where these brave women save the male Hebrew newborns from the Pharaoh’s command to kill them.

The application of this hermeneutic is not limited to reading ancient texts. The spirit of *resolviendo* transcends to contemporary contexts where people on a daily basis contend with issues of life and death, or any other type of survival. One can think of the current deadly situation in Kenya or the everyday reality that Mexicans face trying to cross the border to come to this country. The choices that Mexicans make resemble the choices Jephthah’s daughter made in her own time. Both of them choose between bad and worse, even if that implies dying in the attempt of finding freedom and a new life. Thus, a hermeneutics of *resolviendo* is relevant and serves as an alternative way to read ancient and contemporary contexts where life is at stake.

My interpretation of these stories offers a new way of understanding among the many voices and approaches that shape the current field of biblical studies. This is necessary for the biblical guild that is called to broaden its textual boundaries to include distinctive voices not only from the Hispanic and Latino spectrum of biblical interpretations, but also from Caribbean realities—and many others that have not typically been given an authentic hearing. By recognizing the distinctiveness of readings from specific contemporary contexts, new meanings of the biblical stories will be found. Among the intersection of texts, ancient and contemporary, on the fascinating and endless journey of biblical interpretation, I propose serious consideration of the hermeneutic of

survival, *resolviendo*. It is as unique as are the experiences of people who are faced with limit situations. It seeks to understand the unconventional choices people of widely different times and places--such as those in Cuba and biblical characters like Rahab, the spies, Jael, Jephthah, and his daughter--make under specific circumstances. In doing so, it brings to the fore the common humanity that unites all people regardless of time, culture, and location. A hermeneutics that transcends such boundaries deserves a place in the ongoing task of biblical interpretation.

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## VITA

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## ABSTRACT

### *RESOLVIENDO: NARRATIVES OF SURVIVAL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE AND IN CUBA TODAY*

by Cristina García-Alfonso, Ph.D., 2008  
Brite Divinity School

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The story of Rahab in Joshua 2 has traditionally been interpreted as the account of a foreign woman and low-status prostitute who changes the course of her life when she converts to Yahweh, the God of Moses. In return for her faithful act of saving the spies sent by Joshua to search the land of Canaan, Rahab along with her family obtains salvation once her city of Jericho is destroyed. Rahab reappears in the New Testament where she is remembered in Jesus' genealogy in the gospel of Mathew 1:5.

The story of Jael in Judges 4:17-23 has commonly been read as Jael's violent act of killing Sisera, King Jabin's commander in chief, with a tent peg to his temple while he was asleep. She is also perceived as someone who fails to fulfill the hospitality codes of her society.

The story of Jephthah and his unnamed daughter in Judges 10:6-12:7 describes the tragic event in which Jephthah makes a foolish and horrible vow offering his innocent

daughter in sacrifice to God. Typically this text is read as Jephthah being immensely irresponsible and his daughter being the poor victim who pays for her father's oath.

Such interpretations of these stories are widely accepted within the scholarly biblical guild. But perhaps there are also other ways in which they can be read. In this dissertation, I propose that the stories of Rahab, Jael, and Jephthah can be particularly enriched and give hope to contemporary contexts of hardship when they are read through the Cuban notion of *resolviendo* (survival).

The word *resolviendo*, meaning to find an answer or solution, was first used this way in Cuba at the beginning of the 1990s. It was then that Cuba began to suffer the economic consequences of the fall of socialist countries from which a great part of its resources and economic help had come during the previous four decades. Without subsidies Cuba and its people had to create new economic opportunities. It is in this context that the words *resolver* and *resolviendo* began to have a special meaning for Cubans. *Resolver* in many ways became synonymous with struggling to survive, making do.

I read these biblical stories using narrative criticism as the main methodology along with different contemporary approaches to the texts including feminist, post-modern, and post-colonial approaches. I hope that my readings of the biblical narratives from a perspective of *resolviendo* can offer insights in the struggle for survival many Cubans face today. Last, I explore the implications that a reading through the notion of *resolviendo* or survival can have for other contexts in contemporary societies where survival is at stake.