

# *Resolviendo*

Narratives of Survival  
in the Hebrew Bible  
and in Cuba Today

CRISTINA GARCÍA-ALFONSO

## INTRODUCTION

“Even breathing in this county is illegal,” said my mother on my last visit to the island as we talked about someone who worked for a government company and survives by selling to other people whatever he can steal from the government. This book deals precisely with issues of life and survival in two different contexts, the current Cuban reality and three stories in the Hebrew Bible (Rahab, Jael, and Jephthah and his daughter). The journey starts with my own Cuban context that is particularly defined by a reality of survival that has permeated the society since the fall of the Socialist bloc. Under the economic hardship and shortage of goods that affected the island, Cubans had to find creative ways to survive, to merely make it through the day. I define this reality as *resolviendo* (making do) or *resolver* (to resolve).

In chapter one I explore the origin and use of the words *resolviendo*, *resolver* in Cuba today. I examine the elements of *resolviendo* by dialoguing with literary sources such as novels published by Cuban writers who left the island in the early nineties. Although these are fiction, the realities described in the different literary pieces I use demonstrate the struggle for survival that affects people on the island. In this chapter I travel to sources searching for insights that can unveil the reality of *resolviendo*. However, they are not the only sources I use to explore what *resolviendo* is about, but an entry point, the backdrop I use in my search to understand the essence of the term. In each of the elements I explore as part of *resolviendo*, I dialogue with the works of scholars, who, I believe, have something to contribute to my understanding of the term. For instance, I use the work of philosopher Karl Jaspers on limit or boundary situations when I define that *resolviendo* is about defending life at any cost, trying to get whatever one needs for the sake of mere survival. Similarly, I use the work of Cuban writer Jorge Mañach on *choteo* (mockery) when I discuss how humor has become a way of survival and *resolver* in Cuba. This chapter is critical as it unveils the hermeneutical lens

that informs my readings of other text like the ones found in the Hebrew Bible. Chapter one initiates a trajectory of entering a “text,” the Cuban reality of survival to dialogue with other texts—Cuban writers and other scholars. In this process my hermeneutical lens of survival and *resolviendo* is created, a lens that will inform my journey to the stories of Rahab, Jael, and Jephthah’s daughter.

Because no reading takes place in a vacuum, in chapter two I offer the literary and historical contexts that shape my analysis of the biblical texts for the subsequent chapters. In the literary context I lay out the umbrella methodology of narrative criticism that will be used as a tool along with my hermeneutical lens of *resolviendo* when reading the biblical text. In the historical context, I present the socio-historical and cultural aspects that shape the realities of survival in the biblical texts I analyze later on. Some of these aspects are the status of both men and women in Ancient Israel, the Israelite family, and the realities of women in pre-monarchy and monarchic times.

In chapter three I examine the story of Rahab (Joshua 2) from a perspective of survival. First, I pay attention to the ways in which this story had been traditionally understood—Rahab, the so-called prostitute protected the spies sent to Jericho and in return she and her family are spared from death once her city is destroyed. Second, I explore the social and historical contexts that affect this story such as prostitution in Ancient Israel. My suspicion is that Rahab was an independent woman trying to survive and rescue her family from the coming destruction of the city. With that goal in mind she does whatever it takes to *resolver*, to accomplish what she needs. Through the use of categories of narrative criticism—characters, plot, narrator, time and space—I examine how survival takes place. At the end of the chapter I offer insights on how the Rahab story read from a perspective of *resolviendo* sheds light on the struggles in present Cuba.

The prose version of Jael’s story in Judges 4:17–23 that tells the story of a woman who kills a powerful military leader is discussed in chapter four. Her actions had been traditionally understood as violent. However, I argue that from a perspective of *resolviendo* Jael was surviving. Here I pay attention to the world that shapes the life of this woman and also other characters present in the story. Special attention is given to the theme of violence and gender displayed in the story. Is Jael’s action of killing Sisera more despicable because of the act of killing him or because she is a woman? Are there other layers of violence in this story that are not necessarily shown by the physical act of killing? What does the story have to offer to people surviving on the island or any other context? How do we negotiate issues of life and death?

In chapter five I examine similar questions of life and death as I deal with the story of Jephthah and his daughter found in Judges 10:6–12:7. Often seen from one dimension only the story presents Jephthah as an irresponsible father who makes a foolish vow to God and sacrifices his daughter while the daughter piously accepts his father's decision. Here I analyze the context that shapes the lives of Jephthah and his daughter. I pay attention to the social status of Jephthah as a father, warrior and outcast as well as his daughter and the limitations that her status as an unmarried woman posed in her life. Reading the story from a perspective of survival I see two individuals. Jephthah and his daughter are part of a patriarchal and oppressive larger system that controls both their lives. In the midst of such a system I ask questions about life and death and ultimately about survival. I argue for a more balanced reading that seeks to see a father and a daughter both struggling to survive. Jephthah tries to survive, *resolver*, by offering a vow that would ultimately bring him back to a community that once excluded him. On the other hand, the daughter uses the opportunity to escape from a system that oppresses her, even if that escapes might include dying. As I argue, it is in dying that she finds life, like many Cubans currently do. Last, I offer insights in how this story shapes the ongoing struggle for survival in Cuba today.

Survival is universal. It is not exclusive to the Cuban context or any other context where people struggle to meet their basic needs at the end of the day. However, what makes the Cuban context unique from others is a sum of cultural, social and historical elements that over the last few decades have shaped the lives and idiosyncrasies of Cubans. My hope for this book is to offer a voice among the many others that shape the guild of biblical scholarship in contemporary societies. My hermeneutical lens of survival, *resolviendo* along with my feminist, postmodern and postcolonial approaches aim to dialogue with biblical texts first understood in their own context. In so doing, I hope that new paths are expanded as we journey together in the ongoing walk of biblical interpretation.