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The Hebrew Bible in Contemporary Fiction and Poetry

By Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer.
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For those working and teaching in the increasingly popular realms of religion and literature, biblical reception history, and/or the arts, *The Hebrew Bible in Contemporary Fiction and Poetry* provides a study on reimagined Hebrew Bible narratives from the well-trodden to the more obscure. Editor Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer brings together a range of established and early-career scholars focusing not only on reading list stalwarts like Atwood, Lewis, Diamant, and Pullman, but also extending their critical attention to global authors and poets retelling these stories across multiple languages.

Contributors use the word "retelling" conscientiously to describe literature that "may enhance certain aspects of the [biblical] text and neglect or even omit others", and "may recontextualise and even subvert its message" (1). Though the literature is largely twentieth- and twenty-first-century, Tiemeyer and others are quick to note that the practice is not new: such retellings appear intra-biblically, in rabbinical midrash, in centuries of reception history across numerous religious traditions, and within more recent post-colonial, feminist, or queer re-visions that seek to give voice or renewed perspective to marginalized figures.

The collection follows at first a "canonical" order in which the tales of Genesis unsurprisingly loom large, later addressing prophetic and poetic texts, and finishing with literary genres such as children's, romance, and speculative fiction. Within these, there are some fascinating overlaps in which two or more scholars explore the same biblical retelling, revealing differences in the interpretative strategies of the featured novelist or poet. A retelling may be subversive, intended to unsettle certain biases encoded within the biblical text and its reception; it may be intended to adapt or expand a given reading in order to strengthen certain community values; or it may be deliberately ambiguous or provocative, taking advantage of the sparseness of biblical language, biblical discrepancies, or overlaps with other ancient Near Eastern myths.

Those that fall into the first category include many retellings of the more thinly drawn characters of Genesis, particularly its women. Denae Dyck, Soo Kim Sweeney, and Katherine Low

each read catastrophe narratives (the flood or Sodom) asking which individuals qualify to be saved, and which do not. In these retellings, a minor figure often becomes a "symbolic standing witness" (Low, 54), open to identification with displaced or alienated communities. Next follow several of Genesis's other longsuffering women: Zohar Hadromi-Allouche addresses the disappearance of Sarah/Sarai's ambivalent laughter in modern poetry, and Kathryn Walls turns to American, Canadian, and Iraqi writers who challenge the historic gendered, racial, and cultural othering of Hagar. Jo Carruthers also reads Atwood's handmaid novels in relation to Hagar's naming of God, raising questions of seeing and being seen, of visibility and invisibility. In a more pointed critique, Caroline Blyth demonstrates how Diamant's ostensibly feminist retelling of Dinah obscures and even reinforces rather than subverts the gender-based and racialized violence that runs through these narratives and their reception histories. Chapters on biblical women beyond Genesis identify characters who are significant in Jewish and Christian traditions despite their scant biblical accounts. Mary Brewer turns to Ruth, Hugh Pyper to Bathsheba, and Thea Gomelauri to Abishag, each probing how their retellings convey them as either victim or seductress, or seek to trouble such a longstanding binary. Kirsi Cobb addresses similarly alternating portrayals of Gomer, remarking upon the ways literature can tackle the sexual violence within so many of these texts.

What becomes clear is not only the interpretative flexibility of these retellings, but also the contexts in which their authors are writing. Eric Ziolkowski explores retellings of Judah and Tamar, whose afterlives remain steadfastly entangled both with each other and with their counterparts—lion and Lilith—within aggadic lore. Bradley Gregory identifies literature that portrays Joseph as a scoundrel, a community-builder, and a typological Jesus, each serving as social, moral, and political critiques of the authors' contexts. Likewise, Stuart Lasine reads twentieth-century works that locate the complex leader Moses within fascist dictator roles, while others portray him on the left. Brian Britt turns to another biblical man famed both for his strength and weakness, Samson, in literature from African-American, Zionist, and Israeli perspectives.

Jason Silverman's chapter takes a different route by assessing, often scathingly, the historical inaccuracy of contemporary novelists' rewritings of Daniel. Readers of this chapter might be prompted to ponder the limits and opportunities presented by an author or poet's bias, ignorance or artistic license. In another chapter that reflects on biblical fidelity, David Davage analyses the Psalms in contemporary evangelical praise music, in which there is a tendency towards a Christological interpretation that ratifies particular evangelical tenets. Davage concludes that these songs are useful tools not for better understanding the Psalms, but the communities who adapt them.

The last section of the book turns to literary genre, and its chapters could themselves inspire several separate volumes. Ina Döttinger reads YA and children's retellings of several biblical narratives, noting that these are far from condescending, but "written with a capable reader in mind" (298)—a young person that is critical, discerning, and conscious of how their subject matter might apply to contemporary life. Marian Kelsey explores retellings that surface frequently within fantasy and science fiction because these genres, like many biblical texts, are "used to explore the nature and the boundaries of humanity and society" (314). Turning to Korean political literature, Kyu Seop Kim compellingly demonstrates the use of figures such as Moses, Cain, and Abel in ways that reflect political divides and potential resolutions. By contrast, Ceri Deosun returns to Bathsheba in American evangelical romance novels, which reveal unique tropes and characteristics designed to reinforce evangelical feminine ideals.

Taken together, the volume's contributions demonstrate the plasticity and durability of Hebrew Bible narratives as they continue to stimulate contemporary retellings. The

collection's strengths lie in its biblical and literary range, as well as its stress on multidirectional critique: a literary text may expand or subvert a biblical text; it may provoke a rereading of that biblical text and its other retellings; and it may also inspire a study of the authorial context and the audience for which it has been retold.

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