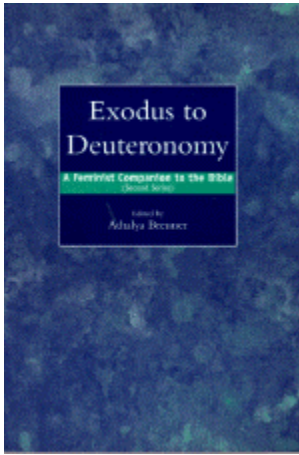


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Brenner, Athalya, ed.

Exodus to Deuteronomy

A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series) 5

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As with most compilation volumes, the quality of contributions to the *Exodus to Deuteronomy* volume in the second Feminist Companion to the Bible series is uneven. In fact, the title of the volume might actually be regarded as a bit misleading. The contributions by Susanne Scholz (“The Complexities of ‘His’ Liberation Talk: A Literary Feminist Reading of the Book of Exodus”), Ilona Rashkow (“Oedipus Wrecks: Moses and God’s Rod”), Cheryl Kirk-Duggan (“Divine Puppeteer: Yahweh of Exodus”), Irmtraud Fischer (“The Authority of Miriam: A Feminist Rereading of Numbers 12 Prompted by Jewish Interpretation”), and Tal Ilan (“The Daughters of Zelophehad and Women’s Inheritance: The Biblical Injunction and Its Outcome”) focus tightly on selected biblical texts. On the other hand, the contributions by Harold C. Washington (“Signifying on Exodus: Reading Race and Culture in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Moses, Man of the Mountain*”), Phyllis Silverman Kramer (“Miriam”), Helen Leneman (“Miriam Re-imagined, and Imaginary Women of Exodus in Musical Settings”), Alice Bach (“Dreaming of Miriam’s Well”), and Leila Leah Bronner (“Serah and the Exodus: A Midrashic Miracle”) are less concerned with the texts from Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy than with postbiblical elaborations on selected characters featured in those pentateuchal books.

The first group of essays focuses on the book of Exodus and the figure of Moses. Scholz criticizes earlier feminist treatments for focusing on the sections of the book of Exodus that feature female characters or contemplate women’s lives within the framework of legal precepts. Scholz casts her essay as “remedying the situation.”

However, the majority of Scholz's essay is little more than an annotated outline of the book of Exodus, with comments focusing chiefly on the female characters or the ways in which the text betrays an androcentric origin. On a few occasions, Scholz begins to move beyond registering female characters and/or androcentric language toward a critique of hierarchical thinking in general, but unfortunately she stops short of developing this theme at much length.

Washington focuses on Zora Neale Hurston's 1939 novel *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. The novel engages issues of class, race, economic injustice, and ethical engagement through a humorous and challenging retelling of the narratives found in Exodus-Deuteronomy. Washington's treatment shows, through Hurston's example, how a creative, resistant reading of a biblical text can promote critical reflection on crucial social issues.

Ilona Rashkow uses comparative mythology and psychoanalytic criticism to explore the significance of "God's rod"—the staff that plays such a prominent role in Moses' wonder-working in Egypt and beyond—as a phallic symbol evoking paternal power over fertility. The psychoanalytic approach contrasts God's rod with the oversized simulacra of Osiris's Phallus used, according to Plutarch, in festivals celebrating Isis's revival of Osiris. Rashkow weaves into her analysis the thematics of circumcision, of staffs that turn into serpents, and of the serpent-on-a-pole of Num 21 to produce a compelling interpretation that deserves sustained attention.

Kirk-Duggan's essay could be described as either wide-ranging or rambling, depending on how well the reader tracks with the flow of the presentation. The metaphors employed are sometimes confusing. The theme of God as a "divine puppeteer" does not seem to be strongly developed, and Kirk-Duggan's repeated claim that Moses is *not* a puppet (89, 91; but cf. 93) seems to belie the title theme. Similarly, Kirk-Duggan wavers metaphorically between whether Pharaoh is a pawn in a "chess game" with God (93) or a competitor in that game (94). Readers who work through the occasionally confusing aspects of Kirk-Duggan's presentation are rewarded, however, not least with Kirk-Duggan's insistence that readers ought not to reduce the storyline of the book of Exodus to a liberative formula, ignoring the violence that comes with the liberation of the Israelites—a point that is important and well-taken.

The second section of the volume features four essays treating the figure of Miriam. Kramer's article reads chiefly like a catalogue of comments on Miriam from rabbinic sources and contemporary female interpreters. The interpretations described are interesting, and the range of topics is broad. Experienced readers might wish for a bit more of Kramer's own evaluations of the interpretations she surveys, rather than simply descriptions. On the other hand, Kramer's descriptions do introduce a range of questions

and suggested answers with which many readers, particularly those who have not read widely on Miriam, may be unfamiliar.

Leneman surveys three songs, three oratorios, and two operas—all from the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries—based (sometimes loosely) on the biblical exodus narrative. Like Kramer’s article, Leneman’s is primarily descriptive and could have been significantly enriched by more of Leneman’s own critique of the musical depictions of Miriam that Leneman surveys.

Bach’s contribution seems to be more about the power of midrash than about Miriam as such; the “well” of the title in fact makes no appearance in the essay. Bach uses *The Prince of Egypt* (the 1998 film by DreamWorks) and Leonard Angel’s 1997 *The Book of Miriam* as examples of modern midrash. Bach seems to have more (and nothing nice) to say about Sandra Bullock’s vocal rendition of Miriam in *The Prince of Egypt* than about the film’s characterization of Miriam as such. One could certainly argue that, far from being the mere “perky sister” that Bach perceives, the film’s Miriam is the first character in the film who is brave enough to “speak truth to power” (as compared with the spineless Aaron). In any event, it seems odd that Bach is so tepid toward the DreamWorks depiction of a multiethnic slave population, with some Egyptians joining the Hebrew exodus, and yet so enthusiastic about Angel’s novelistic depiction of the pharaoh and his followers becoming Hebrews through baptism. Does a novel that depicts a mass conversion of Egyptians to Hebrew religion and ethnicity—to the point of taking Hebrew names—really constitute “a true midrash of the Other” (as Bach characterizes *The Book of Miriam* in the closing lines of her essay)?

Readers more interested in exegesis of biblical passages than postbiblical elaborations on biblical characters should greatly appreciate Fischer’s study of Num 12. Fischer offers a carefully argued analysis of Num 12, highlighting the prophetic contours of Miriam’s speech, the duality of issues involved in the conflict narrated, and the sociohistorical import of the narrative. Fischer locates the origin of the narrative in Yehud, persuasively suggesting that the conflict in Num 12 over Moses’ dismissal of (not his marriage to, as Fischer eloquently argues) his Cushite wife reflects tensions between the priesthood (Aaron), scribal tridents (Moses/Ezra), and female prophets (Miriam) over issues related to ethnicity and marriage.

The volume closes with two essays focused on “daughters.” Ilan’s treatment of Num 27:1-10 is a particularly rich analysis of that text’s origins and postbiblical repercussions. Ilan skillfully shows how this text backfires. She understands the legislation here promulgated to stem initially from the biblical author’s desire to elevate the status of Jewish women with regard to inheritance law. Yet postbiblical appropriations of this statute actually resulted in a constriction of the available options for female inheritance

within Judaism, necessitating the creation of the “deed of gift” so that fathers could pass on material goods to their daughters regardless of sons’ or brothers’ existence.

Bronner rounds out the volume with an essay focusing on midrashic depictions of Serah, daughter of Asher, mentioned three times in pentateuchal genealogies. Bronner shows how the rabbinic legends about Serah cast her in roles unparalleled in Jewish literature.