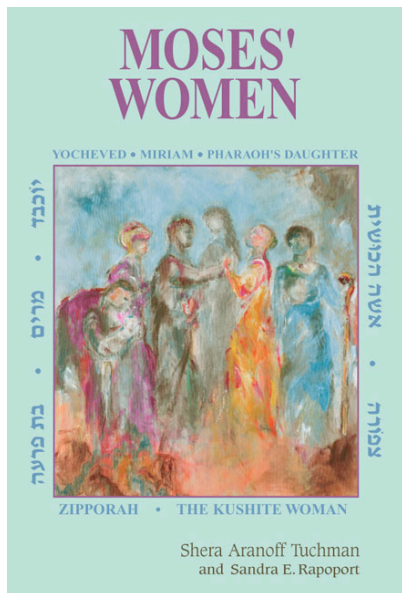


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**Tuchman, Shera Aranoff, and Sandra E. Rapoport**

*Moses' Women*

Jersey City, N.J.: Ktav, 2008. Pp. xxiii + 329.  
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Have you ever wondered what happened to the minor characters in a movie or a book once the cameras stopped rolling or you finished reading the last page? Cho Chang in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series? The piano player Sam in the "Café Américain" in the 1942 movie *Casablanca*? How did their individual lives play out when they no longer touched the life of the main character? Well, J. K. Rowling talked in an interview about Chang's adult life as the wife of a muggle, and the novelist Michael Walsh wrote a sequel to *Casablanca*. Both answered the public demand of people wanting to know more about beloved characters in stories that had actually come to an end.

Avid readers of the Bible might wonder in the same way about some of the biblical characters whom they encounter. What happens to Ishmael, Abraham's son with Hagar, aside from becoming the father of a great nation (Gen 17:20)? What kind of relationship did he have with his father? Did he harbor any grudges against Isaac, the favorite son, or Sarah, Abraham's wife? Or Tamar, mother of the twins Perez and Zerah, whom she conceived with Judah (Gen 38)? How did her life continue after she became a mother? What was it like for her to raise her two boys? Where did she live when she grew old? People who love the stories of the Bible, who might live with and by the biblical texts, would like to have the gaps filled and sometimes wish that they could read between the

lines. They, too, are in good company. Modern novelists such as Anita Diamant in her book about the women of Genesis, *The Red Tent*, have used their creative imagination to turn the lives of minor biblical characters into the main story. Teachers, scholars, and laity both in the Jewish and the Christian tradition have often taken biblical texts as a starting point for expanding the biblical narrative with extra material and, sometimes, additional theology. For centuries, extrabiblical texts in both traditions have witnessed to the human need to tell and retell stories, to muse about hidden motives and veiled destinies, but to do so with the utmost reverence to the sacred text.

*Moses' Women* by Shera Aranoff Tuchman and Sandra E. Rapoport is an important resource for people interested in the biblical women of the exodus and their lives as told both by the rather spare biblical text and by the flowering yet respectful imagination of the authors of orthodox Jewish commentaries and their midrashic explanations. "The women of the Exodus are not granted a powerful biblical voice" (xiii), write the authors in their introduction to the book, but midrash fills in "the 'white spaces' between the black letters of the text" (xv). The authors base their work on Rabbi Moses Alschich's and Rabbi Judah Aryeh Leib Alter's understanding of oral Torah. Both believe that oral Torah always existed alongside written Torah and within the confines of it. The authors of *Moses' Women* also refer to the modern scholar Daniel Boyarin and his view of midrash as a "radical intertextual reading of the Torah itself" that helps us see that there is more than one "single, simple, correct interpretation of the text" (xv). With their work thus grounded, Tuchman and Rapoport set out to allow midrash to put metaphorical flesh upon the bare bones of the women of the exodus, proving in the process that the one great male figure Moses could not have survived and could not have become who he was if it had not been for the many female heroines who gave him life, saved his life, or accompanied him on his life's journey.

*Moses' Women* is organized into seven main parts denoting Moses' major life stages and accomplishments. Most of the individual chapters in each part start out with a biblical text: sometimes one meaning-laden verse, sometimes several chapters of biblical text. A few of Tuchman and Rapoport's chapters, such as the one on Miriam's well (ch. 33) or about Batya's destiny (ch. 34), are only loosely based on the biblical text because only rabbinic commentary further elucidates these women's stories. Each chapter, then, is a colorful tapestry consisting of biblical storytelling woven together with threads of nonbiblical sources written by ancient and modern religious scholars.

Tuchman and Rapoport's treatment of the story of Shifra and Puah can serve as an example for how they approach their work. While the biblical text allots a mere seven verses to the two midwives who defied the pharaoh and saved the newborn sons of the Hebrew women, Tuchman and Rapoport grant them five chapters of their book. The

authors of *Moses' Women* provide a careful reading of each biblical verse about the two women, including the seeming grammatical inconsistencies in the text that have invited various explanations of both ancient and modern commentators. In the process, they discuss many details about which the biblical text remains silent: Ibn Ezra's suggestion about Shifra and Puah being the leaders of more than five hundred Egyptian midwives; Kli Yakar's opinion that the midwives were of Egyptian descent; the explanations of the term "CHaYoT" describing the birthing Hebrew women; or the different suggestions of how exactly the midwives were favored by God (Exod 1:20).

This book is monumental in that it provides a wealth of material that tries to answer any possible question that the biblical text might have left open. In that sense, *Moses' Women* is a bountiful resource for curious readers of the Bible such as can be found in synagogue and church Bible study groups. In the wealth of the material and its selection and presentation, however, also lies one of the weaknesses of the book. Tuchman and Rapoport often tell the exciting stories of the women of the exodus without making an explicit distinction between information contained in the biblical text, information gathered from rabbinic sources, and their own personal interpretations. In addition, when the sources are mentioned, the reference does not include full bibliographic information, which will make it difficult for anyone who might want to use *Moses' Women* for ongoing reading or academic research. The Hebrew texts and glossaries provided at the end of the book are certainly a help in that regard, but why not add a few endnotes about where the various individual texts can actually be found?

Tuchman and Rapoport's impressive work might have also benefited from the frequent inclusion of modern scholarship on ancient Near Eastern archaeology uncovering aspects of daily (women's) life. In the chapter about the midwives Shifra and Puah, for example, Tuchman and Rapoport simply assume that the infant mortality rate at the time of Moses' birth was 50 percent. Modern scholarship on food availability and distribution in ancient times as well as archaeological records from the area might have been able to provide the reader with detailed information and more correct numbers. In addition, the treatment of the midwives' story could have been supported by a short presentation of the ancient Near Eastern beliefs surrounding childbirth and of birthing practices, as they are readily available in works such as Marten Stol's *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible* (Groningen: Styx, 2000).

Tuchman and Rapoport frequently include linguistic study in such a way that even readers who only have a beginner's knowledge of Hebrew are able to follow their argument. This consideration for their nonacademic readership is probably also the reason why texts with Hebrew characters find their place at the end of the book rather than in the main text. While their careful and skillful inclusion of linguistic questions into their work has to be

applauded, Tuchman and Rapoport's work could have further benefitted from the inclusion of modern linguistic scholarship. One example is the naming of Moses in chapter 18. While Tuchman and Rapoport list several explanations of the name Moses and the circumstances of the naming itself as given by the biblical text and by ancient and modern scholars such as Ibn Ezra, Abarbanel, or Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, they could have also provided readers with some of the modern theories surrounding the naming of Moses, such as those that derive the name either from the Coptic root *mos*, the Egyptian *mw* meaning "son," or from the Egyptian *mś/mśj* meaning "to give birth."

*Moses' Women* was produced neither in an academic climate nor for an academic audience. But this reviewer, who immensely enjoyed this masterful retelling of an old story, both on a personal and an academic level, would have enjoyed the book even more if a healthy measure of such modern scholarship would have been added to this monograph. That being said, *Moses' Women* is nevertheless a wonderful resource. Most of all, it is inspiring because of the authors' love for the stories of the women of the exodus, whose influence can be felt far beyond the small sphere the biblical text ascribes to them.