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**Janet Madden**

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**Reguer, Sara. *Onto Center Stage: The Biblical Woman*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2022.**

Reviewed by Janet Madden, Santa Monica CA, USA

Distilled from her forty years of teaching a course titled “The Jewish Woman” at Brooklyn College, Sara Reguer’s exploration of the lives of female Biblical characters uses fiction as a “tool to bring the Biblical woman from the sidelines onto center stage. Her approach is “as valid an interpretation of the creative *midrashim* of the past that tried to keep women on the sidelines,” Reguer writes, “because the writers’ attitudes reflected their own time period and Jewish reality rather than the historic reality of the ancient world” (xiii).

Relying on extensive research on the ancient Middle East as well as on “her practical approach to reality,” Reguer describes her method of “reading between the lines” with the aim of “throw [ing] down the walls built up to protect the Jewish woman.” Whether she is referring to traditional rabbinic commentaries or evolving legal and social mores that occlude real comprehension of the world in which Biblical characters lives, Reguer desires to enliven our connection to these characters through providing a sharp focus, including created dialogue, to amplify what we might call the “everydayness” of their lives and milieux. A true highlight of the book is Reguer’s grounding her book in sound scholarly sources on topics such as ancient middle eastern family structure, polygyny and endogamy--history, anthropology and law are almost invisibly woven into her narrative, adding both depth and authenticity.

The scope of Reguer’s project is expressed both in individual and relational terms. The characters that she chooses to explore are Sara (without the “holy hey” appended to her name, which raises questions about her relationship to *YudHeyVavHey* [Jehovah, God] ; Rebecca; Rachel and Leah, a pair of “powerless women,” Dina and Tamar; sisters-in-law Miriam and Tzipora; Deborah; Chana; the trio of “David’s Wives” --Michal, Avigayil and Bathsheba; Esther; and an “Addendum” titled “Reclaiming the Heroic Jewish Judith.” This uneven principle of organization raises immediate questions of inclusion and representation in the mind of the reader: why omit Hagar, particularly in light of other pairings? Is not one of the most striking aspects of Tamar, repeatedly characterized in the Torah as a *kedesha* (a holy woman in the Canaanite cultural context), her assertion of her right to have a child? If Esther, why not Ruth? Moving outside the

canon of the *Tanach* raises other questions: If Judith is included, albeit in the addendum, why not Susanna of “Susanna and the Elders?”

Told in the third person omniscient point of view, each story strives to make the Biblical characters come alive through descriptive detail, which, together with dialogue, unfortunately reveal the weakest aspect of the book; the juxtaposition of modern idiom and ancient culture can seem jarring, detracting from the power of the narrative. In *Parashat Lech Lecha*, for example, Abram characterizes Sarai as his sister and omits explaining that she is also his wife. She is taken to Pharaoh’s harem and the Torah text tells us that “*YudHeyVavHey* [Jehovah, God] afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.” In Reguer’s telling, she amplifies the precise nature of the “mighty plagues: “The women all seemed to be getting their period, accompanied by terrible cramps. The few pregnant wives and concubines started having early labor pains, with the Pharaoh’s youngest concubine on the verge of hysteria...and Sarai can hear Pharaoh “throwing up in the vestibule.”

For the discerning modern reader, who, even if not familiar with classical *midrashim*, has likely been exposed to Bible-based fiction/modern feminist midrash through novels such as Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent* and Michal Lemberger’s *After Abel*, an exceptionally-conceived collection of short-stories/midrashim based on Biblical women; it is not that Reguer’s characters are not compelling or that her research is not sound—they are and it is. Reguer is careful to list chapter and verse of what might be called her “inspirational textual source” and the bibliography that Reuger appends to each chapter, inviting the reader to dig deeper into the historical and cultural background of these stories, confirms her passion for learning and teaching.

But very “everydayness” for which Reguer strives is also this book’s drawback. Both narrative and dialogue are too often cliched, pedestrian, and uninspiring. Not quite history, not quite literature, Reguer’s work succeeds as record of her teaching and also fulfills its intent of bringing Biblical women to center stage. But it also inhabits a place of promise and possibility that it does not fully deliver.