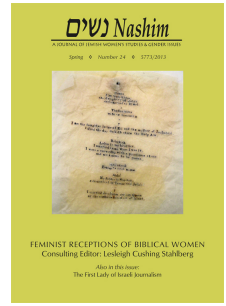
Feminist Receptions of Biblical Women, consulting editor, Lesleigh Cushin Stahlberg



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This issue of *Nashim*, under the consulting editorship of Lesleigh Cushin Stahlberg, addresses the branch of feminist biblical studies that concerns reception history. The issue includes an Introduction from Stahlberg; five principal essays; an essay on Hannah Semer, the "first lady of Israeli journalism"; an additional short essay by Judith Margolis about the very beautiful, biblically inspired work of American feminist visual artist Carol Hamoy; and eight book reviews. In this review, given the usual constraints of space and time, I am only going to focus on the Introduction and five main essays.

In her Introduction, Stahlberg states that feminist theory has long been put to use in subfields such as "literary, anthropological, socio-historical and contextual analysis of the Hebrew Bible." (5) And yet, so far "few venues have been dedicated to feminist work in reception history" (5). This point is, at first, a little misleading, as a substantial amount of feminist material concerning biblical texts and their afterlives has been published in books and journals over the last three decades, though without the designation of "reception history."[1] I think most of us are accustomed to the classification "Cultural Studies and the Bible" to describe this approach of re-presenting biblical texts in various media throughout history. However, as Stahlberg

[1] For example, most of *Semeia: Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz* (Issue 72; 1996) contained feminist analyses of recent cultural representations, largely filmic, of certain biblical stories. With respect to books, there have been numerous feminist lenses cast over the biblical texts and their influence on differing cultures and cultural productions, for example: J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, Gender, Culture, Theory 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Mieke Bal, *Loving Yusef: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2008). A quick glance at the two issues of the new journal from Sheffield Phoenix Press, *Biblical Reception*, shows that feminist work in reception history of the Bible is well-represented, no doubt due to the fact that its editors are J. Cheryl Exum and David J.A. Clines.

explains, it seems that the difference is that "Reception History" is now the term being used to describe the ways in which the Bible has been read, interpreted, and reconceived in both religious communities and so-called secular culture:

> Reception history examines the use of the Bible in faith communities and in secular culture; its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices; its impact on later social and political developments; and its recastings in post-biblical literature, art, music and film. (5)

My initial concern, though, is with the title "Feminist Receptions of Biblical Women," which, after reading the issue, confused me. The title suggests that the essays are specifically focused on how feminists (artists, writers, scholars, etc.) have interpreted certain biblical women. In the Introduction, Stahlberg insists that the essays make "a solid contribution to the reception history of the Bible and a very welcome and much-needed contribution to its feminist receptions." So, while the title informs us that the issue covers feminist receptions of biblical women, Stahlberg's Introduction suggests that the issue is broader. Only two of the pieces (one of the main essays, along with the additional essay on the work of Carol Hamoy) come close to being describable as critical works on the feminist reception of biblical women, as the title suggests. Kristine Henriksen Garroway's "Was Bathsheba the Original Bridget Jones? A New Look at Bathsheba on Screen and in Biblical Scholarship" investigates "how the rise of feminism and feminist biblical scholarship has changed the reception of Bathsheba's story" (53), as told in film. The other four principal essays have nothing at all to do with *feminist* receptions of biblical *women* (although, there is an uncomfortably slight suggestion that the Jewish Sages can be read as proto-feminist; see below). They are feminist analyses of rabbinic (Raveh and Kaniel) and masculine literary texts (Siegel) that engage with and interpret the biblical women anew. And while Zierler does include feminist poetry, they are poems that engage with the figure of Joseph, even if his gendered identity is unstable. In other words, there is a degree of confusion as to what is the focus of this issue.

In "'They Let the Children Live': The Midwives at a Political Crossroads," Inbah Raveh examines the collections of rabbinic readings of the Hebrew midwives of Exodus 1 in *Exodus Rabbah* 1. She argues that the "Sages' homiletical reading describes a profound difference between men and

women, wherein the women represent valued qualities, elevated above those of men" (22). The midrashim greatly praise the actions of the midwives, expanding on the ancient biblical version. For example, in *Exodus Rabbah* 1.15, 3.22, the Sages suggest that not only did the midwives save the lives of the Hebrew children by not following Pharaoh's command to kill, but that they also aided the poorer women by collecting food and water for them from the homes of wealthy women. An alternative interpretation is that the midwives prayed for the unborn, so that they not be born maimed, and for the mothers, that they not die in childbirth. Thus, the Sages "amplify the rhetorical, moral and political power of these women," notably the moral value of life affirmation associated with the maternal-feminine and denigrate what they perceive to be the masculinist "tendency towards control and killing" (22). Raveh argues that the reason for this unusual (in the context of the Hebrew Bible and the midrashim) recognition of the value of the feminine-maternal pertains to the nascent nationalism present in Exodus, a feature that calls for the metaphor of birth: "The admiration for child-bearing femininity, fighting for life and its continuation—as described in the midrash—follows from the need to imagine the birth of a nation, a metaphorical birth" (23).

Raveh acknowledges the likely criticism that this acknowledgement of feminine power is merely "an element in a procreation project that is fundamentally masculine" (24). However, she suggests that the Sages' amplification of the value of feminine-maternal power offers an alternative to the biblical supplanting of this power by the masculinist modes of sacrifice that act as birthing-substitutes, the trope of mono-sexual reproduction that enables the patriarchal myth of a man-made society, as Nancy Jay has argued. Instead, what we are given in *Exodus Rabbah* 1 are moments that "express a unique and powerful flash of recognition of feminine power and the moral position that gives rise to it" (24). But is it really quite as clear-cut as that? This is akin to saying that male-authored texts that acknowledge and celebrate the natural power of the woman's body to birth (a simple fact, albeit an awesome one, and certainly a fact consistently disavowed and repressed in the biblical corpus) are somehow less offensively patriarchal. If this is the case, what does it actually achieve for us? Women have long been put on a (sham) pedestal as birth-givers, and this is entirely consistent with a patriarchal world-view that insists that that is precisely where they belong. Despite Raveh's solid discussions of feminist thinkers such as Carole Gilligan, Sara Ruddick and Nancy Jay, I find her willingness to celebrate the Sages here somewhat optimistic, maybe even a little naïve (she seems to be suggesting

that they might be proto-feminists). The contradictions of the maternal-feminine within differing forms of patriarchy need to be dealt with far more substantially than Raveh provides. In other words, I accept her desire, for whatever reason (religious?), to celebrate the Sages' recognition of maternal power and even a morality associated with it. However, without a robust, critical discussion of those contradictions I think she makes the Rabbis look too good, and I am left wondering why she felt the need to do so.

Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel is also interested in the rabbinic reception and interpretive recasting of female biblical characters. In "'Gedolah Aveirah Lishmah': Mothers of the Davidic Dynasty, Feminine Seduction and the Development of Messianic Thought, from Rabbinic Literature to R. Moshe Haim Luzzatto," she argues for a new interpretation of the axiomatic "Gedolah aveirah lishmah mimitzvah shelo lishma," a statement by R. Naḥman b. Yitzḥak, which belongs to a *sugiyah*, or pericope, that appears twice in the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate *Horayot* [10b–11a] and Tractate *Nazir* [23a–b]). This statement has traditionally been interpreted as "permission to perform a transgression out of a positive motive"; "rejection of one norm in favor of a loftier one"; "violation of the law in order to preserve it"; and (along the lines of Rashi and the Tosafists) "transgression committed for the sake of a commandment" or "for the sake of God" (27). Kaniel points out that most scholarly attention to the statement "has been devoted mainly to discussions of it in kabbalistic, Sabbatean and hasidic literature" (28), without attention being paid to its treatment in rabbinic literature. When we do take into account the rabbinic literature, along with the thought of R. Moshe Haim Luzzatto, Kaniel argues that a more precise interpretation of the statement emerges, one that "serves to justify a specific type of transgression, namely, feminine sexual transgression committed with good intentions before both God and law" (28). This is due to the fact that in this literature, *aveirah lishmah* pertains solely to "a seductive act bordering on sexual transgression performed for the sake of the people of Israel—a role in the drama of national salvation which is assigned to women only" (27). Essentially, she argues that rabbinic pronouncements of the righteousness of five "Gentile" women crucial to the formation of the David line, Lot's daughters (Gen 19:30–38), Tamar (Gen 38), Yael (Judg 5) and Ruth, and their consistent condemnation of male characters for sexual transgressions, leads them to posit a separate moral system for women … an "Ethics of Redemption" (44), and that this has "revolutionary implications" for both ethics and messianic theology (44): "The Sages justify active, seductive women based on

their intentions, whereas they criticize men for actions that have no deeper meaning or link between action and intention" (36).

Kaniel keenly points out, however, that the Sages' discourse about righteous female sexual transgression is fraught with contradictions. For example, women are both seductresses/sinners and redemptive figures; they are both seductive and dangerous, but their sexual transgressions are ultimately applauded and encouraged. Moreover, the reasoning of the Sages is based on some particularly sexist assumptions about women, their bodies and their threatening "otherness" and sexuality. She claims that

> the justification and encouragement of female sexuality offers a glimpse into the Sages' anxiety about their own sexuality and their stubborn battle against desire. This preoccupation exposes a masculine interest in women's "otherness," which does not require a struggle against desire but permits paradoxes and complexities. In projecting "transgression with good intention" onto women, the Sages create a new language to describe women's complex relationship with their own bodies, as well as the powers of seduction and of human fertility. (43)

Ultimately, what the Sages demonstrate through their discussions of this *sugiyah* is "appreciation, wonderment, fear and even jealousy; they understand that there is a different, feminine, wayward path, one that is foreign to them and yet meaningful" (43). They are thereby able to resolve the contradiction between intention and action, transgression and redemption: "The *sugiyah* expands the definition of the 'good and worthy' and can also contain paradoxical concepts: Good is not necessarily tied to evil, but it is part of an elaborate scheme that transcends the nomic and binary fields.… In my reading, only through rabbinic identification with women and curiosity about the Other could such a rich new language have evolved" (44).

I kept waiting for the feminist response: that all of this (and it is a very dense article, probably because it is based upon her doctoral dissertation) is yet another example of how sexist, masculinist thinking expropriates and colonises the feminine for its own benefit. But in the end, Kaniel seems too impressed by the mental gymnastics of the rabbis, even if born out of their anxieties about women and their sexuality. I am really not sure what is so revolutionary about all this.

Garroway ("Was Bathsheba the Original Bridget Jones?") explores the development of Bathsheba as depicted in American film and in feminist bib-

lical studies. Focusing on the question of whether Bathsheba was an innocent victim or a cunning agent in the drama that unfolds with King David, Garroway notes that, because the ancient literary version of the story is "mysterious and fraught with background," both feminists and filmmakers seek to fill in the gaps found in 2 Sam 11. Furthermore, she claims that feminism has itself been instrumental in changing the way the story is told. The post-war "Woman's Film" *David and Bathsheba* (1951) appears before the progressive years of second-wave feminism. Largely in keeping with the image of the post-war American woman, with the new ideas of freedom and autonomy afforded her during the Second World War (the "Rosie-the-Riveter" phenomenon), Bathsheba is depicted as somewhat strong and independent, admitting to knowing that David would see her bathing and that she'd set the whole scene up. However, the film maintains all gender stereotypes of the day, for ultimately (both despite and due to the romance of the film) Bathsheba is a woman who wants a powerful man as a husband, and she gets him. By 1985, when *King David* appears, the feminist movement and feminist biblical studies is in full swing. Garroway claims that Bathsheba is here presented as an "independent and cunning woman," "a sexually liberated woman, comfortable in her own skin," and one aware of her reproductive rights (59). The mini-series *Kings* (2009) does away with the bathing scene altogether, while also taking major liberties with the ancient narrative. Bathsheba, here called Helen, is a mistress of Saul, mother to their sickly son. To be perfectly honest, I do not know whether I can agree with Garroway that Helen is even meant to be Bathsheba, and she spends most of this section discussing feminist work from the beginning of this century, probably due to the rather weak link between the series and 2 Sam 11. Finally, noting that no post-feminist Bathsheba exists in film, Garroway posits a semi-new narrative and a new-ish Bathsheba based upon the success of Western popular cultural figures such as Carrie Bradshaw and Bridget Jones (hence the annoyingly cool title—such titles in biblical studies always make me think of "Christian rock," trying desperately to make the Bible and Christianity relevant for the youth; this making relevant is ultimately part of Garroway's agenda here). In Garroway's creative reimagining, Bathsheba is a "modern self-monitoring woman," and this makes Bathsheba relevant for the successful modern woman who also longs for "the perfect man" (65).

Apart from the weak linkage between the third filmic version and the biblical text, I found Garroway's uncritical assumptions about post-feminism completely disconcerting. Garroway demonstrates some understanding of

post-feminism as the position young women adopt as a result of feminism being taken for granted: "young women of the twenty-first century belong to a post-feminism generation that actively distances itself from feminism. They no longer need to strive for equality and freedom —it is a given. Young women are 'so over' feminism that they are open once again to subjecting the female body to the male gaze.… In the heyday of feminism, this would have been sharply criticized. But today, in the liberated world, young women see such images not as an affront to the female body but as a choice" (64). The "liberated world"—seriously? While all of this seems demonstrably true about contemporary western societies, surely it is our job as thinkers not just to unpack the reasons for this situation, but also to criticize it as, oh I don't know, patriarchy working at peak torque? Garroway embraces the idea of "the modern self-monitoring woman," which apparently is a woman who is "obsessed with self-improvement and constantly weighing her options. What should she eat? Whom should she date? What events should she attend? She must juggle the pressures of her job, family, physique, friends and biological clock, all while trying to find the perfect man" (65). Ugh. Such a woman is surely akin to the self-disciplining woman that, according to Sandra Bartky's critical assessment of Foucault,[2] emerges as part of the process of the modernization of patriarchal domination. Just because young women now don't give a damn (apparently) because they're so liberated doesn't mean we all have to accept it uncritically and move on.

While Garroway's essay is the only one of the five principal essays that actually reflects the title of the issue, her own contribution to reception history is not even feminist. Relatedly, what I found most curious was Garroway's assumption that the Bible needs to remain relevant in our time: "reading the Bathsheba narrative through the lens of a self-monitoring Bridget-Jones-meets-Carrie-Bradshaw woman brings the narrative into the twenty-first century and makes it appealing to the post-feminist generation of women" (65). So what? Why does it need to be appealing to them? Of course I agree with the idea that people should be familiar with the biblical stories, but this is because I teach Western literature and philosophy, and knowledge of the Bible seems to me to be often quite essential to the comprehension of those discourses. The question of it remaining *relevant* is entirely differ-

[2] Sandra L. Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 61–86.

ent and requires a strong defense, in my opinion. It is difficult to imagine Shakespearean scholars getting away with saying that Shakespeare's plays and sonnets need to be interpreted anew so that they remain relevant to contemporary audiences, without giving any informed literary-critical, or even philosophical reasons as to why they think this is so necessary. I can only suspect that it is probably the case that Garroway wants the biblical stories to remain current for religious reasons, which I can understand, even though I completely disagree (but that is too long a discussion). If this is the case, then we have yet another example of a woman's religious concerns overriding feminist-political ones, as Gerda Lerner warned.[3] If that isn't the reason, well, I'm at a loss really.

As her title suggests, Erica A. Siegel examines the apocryphal character of Susanna in three short prose works by Chekhov ("Chekhov's Susannas"). The biblical story concerns many things (male lust, treacherous abuse of authority, the vindication of the good, etc.), but it is also, as Ellen Spolsky points out, "about witnessing: about the power of telling and retelling. As a story of a woman told for her by people whose interests are not her own, it is a story about the relationship between narrative and control and about narrative as control over death."[4] Siegel explores the means by which Chekhov utilizes the biblical figure of Susanna, who is beautiful, righteous and knowledgeable of Mosaic Law, to elaborate his views on who the artist is, what *he* does, especially when it comes to the question of the ethics of appropriation. As Siegel puts it: "Each of these stories deals in its own way with the exploitability of women. Taken together, they reveal Chekhov's portrait of the male artist as less a creator than a borrower. He does not so much write as rewrite, reinterpret and appropriate" (74). "Artist's Wives" (1880) is the story of how a co-habiting group of artists and writers abuse and exploit their wives for their artistic ends. One of the artists' wives refuses to sit nude for her painter husband, who wishes to create an image of the "Old Testament Susanna." "Anuita" (1886) is a story about how two men exploit and dehumanize the body of a woman through their gaze. The medical student (Anuita's boyfriend) uses her body to learn about the skeletal system by tracing her ribs with a piece of coal. Her boyfriend then lends her out to his artist friend who is painting a picture of Psyche and needs a model. In "The Mire"

[3] Gerder Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

[4] Ellen Spolsky, Introduction, in *The Judgment of Susanna: Authority and Witness*, ed. Ellen Spolsky (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 1; cited in Siegel, 74.

(1888), unlike the earlier two stories which Siegel argues removes any sense of eros, Susanna appears as a lusty Jewish woman called Susanna Moiseevna, who is the seductress of two men rather than their victim. Why? Siegel makes the fine point that in "The Mire" Chekhov essentially removes all the features of the apocryphal Susanna (her virtue, innocence, meekness, and her faith) that made the story and Susanna herself appropriable by Christians, as a figure of Christian martyrdom and as a symbol of the resurrection. She argues that with "The Mire" Chekhov is parodying the very process of typological exegesis by Christian readers of the Jewish texts: "'The Mire' challenges not only Christian appropriation of Old Testament narrative, but also, perhaps, any attempt to assign a text ultimate meaning. Susanna Moiseevna, in this light, is like the biblical text itself—she is eminently available to the men, but she is stolidly impenetrable" (91).

This is a fine essay. But my question is this: what exactly is feminist about this article? Siegel shows us how Chekhov utilizes a female biblical character to elaborate, through fiction, his theory about how the artist/writer essentially exploits what he can (ur-text, object, woman, etc) to be an artist. Yet, there is no critical point made by Siegel concerning the gendered nature of this particular theory of creative production (akin to Kristeva's blind acceptance of Barthes's theory of the writer as *he* who bravely approaches the erotic body of the mother). And it is not simply that Siegel is merely presenting Chekhov's ideas to us. Indeed, she tells us that what we might learn from Chekhov's Susanna stories is that "while the process of human interpretation of the holy text may be an exercise in frustration, it is never fruitless, and it is unlikely to be finite" (93). In an issue concerning feminist work in reception history of the Bible I at least expect some feminist questioning and challenging of the theories/presuppositions of the masculine literature under scrutiny. It is not adequate (and has not been for decades) to derive a universal conclusion based on the gender-biased musings of men, even if those musings freely admit something like a gendered ethical poverty.

Finally, in "Joseph(ine), the Singer: The Queer Joseph and Modern Jewish Writers," Wendy Zierler offers an alternative, queer literary lineage from Joseph through to Kafka and more recent women's Hebrew poetry. By looking at queer readings of the story of Joseph in Genesis, along with rabbinic interpretations, Zierler draws our attention to a Joseph who is "an exaggerated, campy performer, an over-the-top storyteller or actor, who enacts and 'stages' conflict" (100). Moreover, Joseph's queer legacy is necessary, argues Zierler, as a model of being that is essential to the redemptive narra-

tive that ensues in Exodus. She then reads Franz Kafka's strange story about a singing mouse called Josephine ("Josephine the Singer, or: The Mouse Folk," 1924), Nurit Zarchi's "And She is Joseph" (1983), and Esther Ettinger's "A Wire Ladder, Bereft of Wing" (1980) and "Song/Poem before Sleep" (1999) alongside the biblical story. Her argument is that these texts enable an alternative to the very masculinist lineage that Leslie Fiedler has argued emerges from Joseph, the "archetypal ancestor of all Jewish dreamers" (from Joseph to Sigmund Freud and Kafka, to Nathanael West, Henry Roth, Delmore Schwartz, J.D. Salinger, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth).[5] Instead, with the assistance of queer theory, she believes it is possible to offer a "perhaps more faithful reading of the biblical Joseph, one that calls attention to the epicene/queer/flamboyant and performative aspects of Joseph's character as portrayed in the Bible" (98), and one that enables Joseph to be understood as the forefather not just of male writers, but female as well. Joseph might also be a model for "cross-gender (dis)identifications" (98). By reading these texts together, Zierler claims that "Joseph emerges from this reading as a character whose identity transcends gender and other social definitions, and who furnishes a model for a way of being that becomes necessary for the unfolding of the redemptive trajectory of the Exodus story" (98).

This too is a fine essay, the best in the issue. Zierler gives deft treatment to the excesses of the biblical story (including Joseph's name, which in Hebrew means "addition" or "supplement") and makes strong links between it and the later literature. My only criticism is that Zierler seems to accept the subversive potentials of queer theory for women without critical questioning or defense. The relationship between queer theory and feminism is not uncontroversial, and I think the essay would have benefited from an informed discussion of this.

Overall, each essay offers interesting material for those concerned with the ways certain biblical texts have been thought about and recast by later (mainly male) readers, writers and filmmakers. I was, however, disappointed by the quality of feminist thinking that took place in some of the essays. And, as a thematic issue, it lacks a proper focus.

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[5] Leslie Fiedler, *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler* (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 178.