

○ REVIEW OF ATHALYA BRENNER'S *I AM... BIBLICAL WOMEN TELL THEIR OWN STORIES*

Jennifer Bird

Jennifer Bird reviews *I am... Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*, by Athalya Brenner (Minneapolis: Fortress; 2005. 228 pp.)

'Reporting live, from some island in the Pacific, this is Proverbial (and highly educated) Fly-on-the-Wall,¹ at a gathering of biblical characters: all women! The illustrious speakers will be each of the women themselves, alive after all these years and here for the specific purpose of telling *their* version of the events.

'A voice over the intercom² is now reminding each of the women how honest they can be, how much of the real issues and concerns of life they are allowed to bring into their stories here in this safe space, and that they can even utilise theory of various types, normally applied in non-biblical literary studies, if they wish.' *You'd think that they would already know this – how long have men and women scholars been bringing into biblical studies various literary critical approaches, Paula? Thecla? This disclaimer seems a bit over the top to me – it is making such a big deal out of something that has already been done. Or perhaps it is said because the voice expects that it will be non-scholarly types who will read the transcript of the conference.*³ 'And she is claiming that these stories will be a part of the re-writing and re-reading of scripture; re-reading that fills in the gaps and re-writing that "turns the tables" and retells the biblical story "unabashedly" from their context with their own concerns in the foreground.⁴ This will be quite exciting, Paula,⁵ as these women will be connecting many of the pieces of their stories that have been told over the years since the original writings – pieces found in Midrash, in various forms of art, or even in real life events to some extent, what the voice is calling a "panchronic intercultural connection". There are rather significant disclaimers being set forth here at the beginning, which is helpful.

'You may wonder how these particular women were chosen to be here. It appears that these women were only significant enough to show up in the biblical text as part of the men's stories, but were never "properly disposed of", if you will.' *Another interesting concept, I must admit. While I do appreciate the concern of women not being given enough of their own subjectivity, believe me I do, I also wonder if she is making too much of this lack of closure, which she claims gives them immortality. Personal preference, I suppose.*

'Finally, we can expect that each story will be "covertly exploring" at least one specific methodological, theoretical, or ideological issue.' *Again, an interesting description, since the voice went out of her way to say that these women were going to be quite explicit about addressing particular issues.*

Ah, I must also point out that the voice has not specifically noted for whose sake this gathering is being recorded. Hmmm, can the same conference be appealing to both lay and 'guild' type of folks? I suppose it can – let's see if they pull it off.

<Pause for presentation>

'We just finished hearing from Adah and Zillah, the two wives of Lamech (Genesis 4). What an appropriate pair to begin with as development of all "constructive cultural branches of

knowledge” has been attributed to their boys, yet we all know how essential a mother’s encouragement and instruction is in a child’s development and accomplishments. It is a pity those women’s gifts have only been acknowledged through their children – a theme many women can appreciate, I imagine.’

<Pause>

‘Whoa! The stories of Dinah (the “Twelfth Sheep”) and “Madame Potiphar” (“Lust is My Middle Name, I Have no Other”) really cut to the chase, Paula and Thecla. They did quite a fine job of drawing attention to the problematics inherent in strictly politicizing their stories and thereby overlooking the (actual) relational dynamics – that of rape and mutual love and affection, respectively. “Madame Potiphar” filled in her story by referring quite extensively to Midrashim and artwork, highlighting the fate of women in relations, whether licit or illicit in nature, with men. The message I get from her is that according to biblical injunctions and warnings, women are not to express desire or love for a man’ (*and I must add that she does leave the discussion within a heterosexual context*).

<Pause>

‘“I Am the Bird Woman” Zipporah told us of her adventures joining with four other flying women, from stories throughout the ages, to create an all-female aviation company.’ *I must confess that her narration was delightful, in the way that she wove together so many storylines, but in the midst of it all I somewhat lost sight of Zipporah. Strange experience, since I am so accustomed to hanging on every word the people in the room are saying. In the end I suppose she was trying to point to the tension between the biblical account giving her figurative wings and of grounding her, permanently.*

<Pause>

‘I know that I should not be choosing favorites here, but I must admit that I have enjoyed Rahab’s story the most so far. Something in the way she made clear the connection between her biblical story and the current events in Jericho between Israelis and Palestinians was quite powerful. Seeing Rahab through her own eyes has been the best treatment of the underlying ideological concern for the misrepresentation of sex workers and their trades. The social and cultural dynamics come through loud and clear in this case. Well done, Rahab!’

<Pause>

‘Hmmm, Paula and Thecla, did either of you ever consider Ruth and Orpah as members of the bourgeoisie?!? Aside from the somewhat anachronistic use of the term, I am not sure what to make of all these women – Ruth, Orpah, Rahab – being upper class. Orpah just confessed that she and Ruth were step-sisters, of the same royal father. What are we to make of the interpretation that so many wealthy women were chosen to play these parts in holy writ, whether portrayed correctly or not? It is something to think about, in this scholarly playful kind of a way’.

<Pause>

‘My how these women do like the philological playfulness of their own names. These stories have made me take another look at who is naming whom, and for what purpose, you know? Rizpah, Daughter of Ayah, is named “burning ember” and is recorded by association with her mother. How unusual! But I do not quite understand why Rizpah felt the need to connect her story with the other women and birds stories. Again, perhaps I’m losing my acuity, but it seems that some of the connections are not entirely clear.’

<Pause>

‘Well, Paula and Thecla, we just heard from the infamous Tamars (“A Double Date”) and the almost unheard of sister of David, Zeruiah. We all know various twists on the precarious situations of both of the Tamars, though it is always nice to hear a story from a first person perspective. Zeruiah’s story, “My Sons, the Generals”, truly finds immortality in the resonance with Rivka Guber’s story – a modern woman who also lost two sons in a war of independence for Israel. In Zeruiah’s words, her own story is redeemed by the life and positive choices that Rivka made – turning her feelings and bitterness to good and seeking peace, choices not available to Zeruiah in the texts of sacred scripture.’

<Pause>

‘This poor woman, being named “Rat” all these years! Huldah claims that it was because she was well respected that she was sought out in lieu of those other two male prophets. As for the unfortunate event where she delivered a prediction that did not come true, well, the way she tells it she deliberately chose to lie, to go easy on poor old Josiah. Sometimes I just don’t know who to believe, the “holy writ”, the rabbis, the artists, or the woman herself. But what a fascinating story that the rabbis tell of her office in the temple; my, how respect for her grew over time!’

<Pause>

‘I can tell that Shulammit and I are turned on by very different aspects of men. I guess that’s to be expected when you’re talking about a woman and a fly, but you get the point, eh, Paula? She claims that the third poem in the Song of Solomon/Songs (7:1-7) was actually written intending to be a humorous and jocular subversion of the traditional *wasf* (a descriptive love poem). I personally don’t buy it, but she does offer a vivid description of how it could be so, in her story.’

<Pause>

‘Aha! The Convener finally reveals her own identity. She is the Medium at Endor: as a woman interested in the future, she is well versed in the past. She was also inspired to put together this conference by a combination of twentieth century artwork and literature – by women, for women.’

Ladies, I must say that even though I have been here in the room with these women, listening with rapt attention, I am left with the feeling that each character is just as ephemeral today as they have been throughout the ages. I expected that the choice to have a conference with all these women telling their stories would produce more substantial images. But they still seem to escape being known.

[Thecla] ‘Fly, in light of your last comment, how do you anticipate the transcript of this conference will be referred to in the future? Did they succeed in presenting information for both the laity and the guild?’

‘I am glad you asked, Thecla. If I were teaching, say at the undergraduate level, I might include the individual stories, one at a time, for a refreshing new twist on these women and how they have been perceived throughout the ages. Of course seminarians of all types would probably enjoy it as well.’

‘Oh – it is time to conclude the conference (“Goodbye”). In a roundtable fashion, the women are now taking turns grouping themselves according to their life experiences, for easier remembrance or association. I suppose there is comfort in being understood and in no longer standing alone in their stories.’

‘Paula, Thecla, this wraps up my job here at the conference. The women are now talking to Zipporah about shuttling them back to the... whoa! Oh no! Here comes The Convener with... what is that in her hand?? I think it’s... a copy of the release form everyone is signing! She’s swatting at me with it! Yikes!! I’ve managed... to avoid... these situations... all... my...’

<squash>

[Paula] ‘Oh no! I think we just lost Fly-on-the-Wall! It sounds like she got swatted by one of the conference attendees. Fly-on-the-Wall has always been so careful about not getting caught...’

[Thecla] ‘Yes, well, that’s the way it goes, I suppose. But you know, contrary to one of the premises mentioned in the pre-conference disclaimer, I do imagine that Fly-on-the-Wall will continue to live on in the ruminations, and perhaps in the intermittent writings, of humans for ages to come, even though she has now been “disposed of” officially. I really don’t think that it requires that a character be left “alive” in a text in order for her or his story to carry on, as interesting as the proposition may be. The way I see it, it is always some form of reincarnation or regeneration if a character, biblical or otherwise, takes on a life outside of its original setting. What do you think, Paula?’

‘I must agree with you, Thecla. With that in mind, perhaps at their proposed gathering in 2525 they will see fit to invite Sarah/Sarai, Rebekah, Jael, Rachel, Leah, Judith, Deborah...’

‘Good idea. Someone make a note of this suggestion and send it to the Medium from Endor.’

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In keeping with the nature of the book itself, I have chosen to ‘review’ this book through the lenses, though only two of the hundreds such a creature sports, of that proverbial fly on the wall many of us have wished we could have been at one time or another. The choice of this particular creature will become clear at the end – much as Brenner’s convener’s identity is held out to the end for effect.
- ² This is in reference to the author’s Preface.
- ³ I will distinguish between Fly’s reporting and her commentary on what she is hearing by the latter appearing in italics.
- ⁴ In particular, Brenner is clear of her own context as a Zionist/Hebrew/Israeli. Brenner is also careful to state that she is offering her own interpretation of the stories, and is by no means attempting to establish ‘truth’ regarding these matters.
- ⁵ One of two women in the newsroom, the other is Thecla.