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Feldman, Marla J. *Biblical Women Speak: Hearing Their Voices Through New and Ancient Midrash*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society/Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. 2023.

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How to hear voices from the ancient past? How to have biblical characters speak to us in the 21st century? How do we allow them to tell their own story, their own *wider* story, not just the few sentences allotted to them in Scripture? In the title of her book *Biblical Women Speak: Hearing Their Voices Through New and Ancient Midrash*, Marla J. Feldman sets out her methodology. She presents several biblical women whose accounts are found in the Torah, in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. As the title indicates, Feldman utilizes traditional midrash, but she also creates her own “modern midrash,” oftentimes based on or reflective of ancient sources.

There are ten chapters, each divided into set subsections. She first presents the actual biblical text on which she will expatiate. This is followed by Feldman’s own Modern Midrash, her own personal take on the who/what/why of these women, that is, their own story as told by or through Feldman. This is followed by a segment dealing with Classical Commentary and Midrash about that woman, and concludes with the Author’s Commentary, complete with a subtitle. For example, chapter two is devoted to a couple of the traditional matriarchs, “Leah and Rachel: Devoted Sisters and Bitter Rivals.” The Biblical text is Genesis 35:16-21. The Modern Midrash (Feldman’s creation) section is titled Leah’s Eulogy. In terms of the Classical Commentary and Midrash, the subtitle is Sisters, Wives, Rivals and Matriarchs. The Author’s Commentary is A Tale of Two Sisters.

By way of example, the parallel sections for chapter nine are, “Miriam: Exiled by God, Dwelling Beyond the Camp.” The Biblical text is Numbers 12:1-16. Feldman’s Modern Midrash is titled, Miriam’s Fringes, and the Classical Commentary and Midrash has as its subtitle, Crime and Punishment. The Author’s Commentary is labeled Outcasts and Angels.

The ten chapters are: 1. **Keturah**: Abraham’s Last Wife; 2. **Leah and Rachel**: Devoted Sisters and Bitter Rivals; 3. **Bat Shua**: Judah’s Unnamed Wife; 4. **Bilhah**: The Loving Handmaid; 5. Pharaoh’s Daughters, Part 1: **Potiphar’s Unnamed Wife**; 6. Pharaoh’s daughters, Part 2: **Puah**,

Shiphrah, and the Sacred Sisterhood; 7. Pharaoh's Daughters, Part 3: **The Princess and the Slave Girl** Who Rescue Moses; 8. **Shelomith Bat Dibri**: The Blasphemer's Mother; 9. **Miriam**: Exiled by God, Dwelling Beyond the Camp; and 10. **Noah**: Daughter of Zelophehad.

Feldman explains that the “word *midrash* is derived from the Hebrew root *d-r-sh* [*dalet-resh-shin*], meaning ‘to seek’ ... historically midrash developed as the rabbis plumbed the [biblical] text for knowledge about its deeper meaning and for direction in how to guide their own communities in their own days.” She notes that there are two types of midrash, halakhic/legal, and aggadic/narrative midrash, and she adds that sometimes these “elements overlap” (p. 180). Yet, as Gary G. Porton explains in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, “the so-called halakic midrashim contain a good deal of nonlegal material, and the so-called haggadic midrashim contain a significant number of legal statements. Second, it is simplistic to draw a sharp difference between legal passages and nonlegal passages, for both served as interpretations of revelation and as guides to one's actions.” (Porton: 1992: 4.820). Furthermore, as Adele Berlin has written the “rabbis were not interested in what we call ‘the original meaning of the text.’ They were more intent on the meaning for their own time, and they engage in obviously anachronistic readings. They thereby lift the biblical story out of its original context and apply it to another context. In so doing, they keep the Bible alive” (Adele Berlin, “Writing a Commentary for a Jewish Audience.” *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*. Eds. S. W. Crawford and L. J. Greenspoon, London: T. & T. Clark, 2003, p. 15.) Like the traditional rabbis and commentators, R. Feldman tells biblical verses, and midrashic commentaries, and lifts them out of their context, refashions them, and creates new understandings which can speak to us in our day.

When it comes to Feldman's own creative modern midrash, she oftentimes builds on materials found in traditional sources, but she adds her own understanding and interpretation, developing a message that seeks to address an audience in the 21st century. For example, in her chapter on Bilhah, ostensibly she refers to Genesis 50:15-17, Joseph's brothers attempt to blunt any sense of revenge on Joseph's part following the death of Jacob. Yet the underlying Scriptural verse really is Genesis 35:22, “Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine; and Israel found out.” How to understand that verse, how to explain the dynamics of that episode? Feldman writes about Bilhah, “The rabbis' version of events, whether depicted as an inappropriate assignation or violent assault, imagines outrageous and scandalous relations between these biblical characters. The

equally justifiable interpretation in this modern midrash [as depicted by Feldman] reveals something more common: the consequences of familial jealousy, favoritism, and unresolved childhood wounds ... Reuben and Bilhah are just two more victims of the cycle of family dysfunction that continues from one generation to the next.” (p. 64).

How believable are these women? They certainly have agency, and make a strong case for their viewpoint, their lived experiences as mediated through Feldman’s writing. As I read about their lives I oftentimes thought, yes, that could be, though on other occasions I thought that the character’s voice and experiences were a bit fanciful. It is to her credit that Feldman chooses as her subjects women who are well known (Leah, Rachel, Miriam, and women certainly hardly known, such as Bat Shua, Shelomith Bat Dibri, and Noah, the daughter of Zelophehad.)

The book, over 200 pages, is enhanced by several additions which are found at the close of the volume. In an Appendix she offers her Overview of Midrash, with subsections on Types of Midrash, Hermeneutical Rules, a History of Midrash, Hellenistic Literature, Early Midrashic Anthologies, and Medieval Commentators. She then features a very helpful Glossary of Classical Sources, followed by Endnotes from her chapters and a Bibliography.