

FOREWORD

The Bible may not be the oldest artifact of the human imagination, but it is the starting point for three world religions and, perhaps even more impressively, a work of authorship that still casts its long shadow across our global civilization. That's why the stories of the Bible have inspired men and women to engage in daring acts of reinvention, a tradition that begins within the pages of the Bible itself, where later-added texts put a new spin on older ones, and continues across the last several millennia. In that sense, *The Alphabet of Ben Sira*, a medieval collection of sometimes-bawdy Bible stories, and *God Knows*, a modern novel styled as the autobiography of King David as reimagined by Joseph Heller, are all examples of the same phenomenon.

And so is *After Abel and Other Stories* by Michal Leemberger. She comes to the Bible honestly, by which I mean

that she is willing and able to penetrate the veil of piety that conceals some of its most fascinating and consequential secrets, and she has mastered the intricacies of biblical scholarship that allow us to understand when, why and by whom the Bible was written in the first place. Above all, she is able to enter and inhabit characters who exist for us today only as stray lines of text in the Bible, and she allows us to see the biblical landscape through their eyes.

Lemberger sets herself a lofty goal: "I imagined myself into characters and situations that are well known by dint of being in the most popular book ever published," she explains, "but from an angle that, I suspect, most have never considered." Her exercise in empathy is more than a literary conceit; it can be understood as a reverential act that honors one of the core values of the Bible: "You know the heart of the stranger, for you were once strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exod. 23:9). But it is also a courageous effort to crack open the ancient text and allow the reader to glimpse new meanings in the ancient scriptures.

From the first page of her narrative, and throughout the nine stories collected here, we hear voices that originate in the pages of the Bible and yet, at the same time, ring with passion and candor that is the handiwork of the author. She starts each story with a spare line of biblical text and draws from it a marvelous vision of real

people in a real world, and she spins her stories with such conviction and audacity that they come fully alive.

"This won't make it into the official telling," Eve confides to the reader. "The men who will come later to write it all down will leave this part out. Something always gets left out." The Bible tells us that Adam named all of the animals, but it is Eve, in Lemberger's telling, who names the parts of the human body: "Shoulder, elbow, nipple, stomach, shaft, scrotum."

After Abel also belongs in another and more recent biblical tradition. Women have been (and still are) excluded from the study and teaching of the sacred texts in certain circles of all three Bible-based religions. Lemberger, however, is to be counted among the women who assert the right to engage in the work of biblical scholarship and have distinguished themselves by their achievements. It is no accident that Lemberger has chosen the most intriguing women of the Bible to write about, some of them deeply familiar—Lot's wife, Miriam, Hagar—and some, like Zeresh, wife of Haman, who have been almost entirely overlooked. Each woman in *After Abel*, however, is depicted with a narrative richness that is mostly lacking in the Bible. The Bible repeatedly shows us that men are privileged to talk to God, for instance, but in Lemberger's stories, women enjoy the same opportunity and exercise it in defiant ways. "You won't trick me again," Hagar says to

God or his emissary. "I know your ways now."

Like the best examples of modern *midrash*, Lemberger's stories can and should be read in conjunction with the passages of the Bible from which they grew and flowered. I suspect, as the author surely intended, that the comparison between the sparse biblical text and Lemberger's lush narratives make a point about how women were regarded by the original authors and editors of the Bible. She has liberated these remarkable women from the constraints imposed on them by the priestly custodians of the sacred text, and she has given them a new birth as figures of flesh and blood, heart and brain.

—Jonathan Kirsch

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AFTER ABEL

*"Adam knew his wife, again, and she bore a son
and named him Seth, meaning,
'God has provided me with another offspring
in place of Abel,' for Cain had killed him."*

Genesis 4:25

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This won't make it into the official telling. The men who will come later to write it all down will leave this part out. Something always gets left out.

For so many years, it was just the two of us, and only God to talk to. He's great and powerful, but He doesn't have much to say. He talked enough to set this whole world spinning, but after that, shut His mouth. Now He parcels out His speech: a sentence here, question

there, and short commands in between. And then Adam, trying his hardest to imitate Him, thinking he's like God because he guards his words, as if exhausted by all that naming he did before I came along. It leaves a woman lonely.

My first boy, Cain, his feet too soft for the hard earth at first, looked to his father for guidance. I thought his early babbles meant a change, but then he fell silent too, hoarded his words as if they were too precious to share. Only Abel, child of my heart, would fill the long nighttime hours with stories and songs. His voice was not pleasing, but it was a sound in this great empty world.

Adam and I had to figure it all out ourselves, how our bodies fit together, what they were capable of. We got better over time, found a private language our bodies could speak, but in those early days of fumbling, it was all buck and roll over. Not much in it for me, to be honest. He thinks he has it so bad, all that work in the fields, but I'm right there beside him, sowing and harvesting, breaking my own back to get us fed. He never almost died from his labor the way I did the second time.

Another thing that won't make it into the final telling, I'm sure, is the way his labor can lay a man out at the end of a hard day's work, irritable and hungry if the fields don't give, the goats run away, but when I labored to give birth to Abel I bled so badly God Himself had

to step in. That was my first witnessed miracle. If He hadn't saved me, there'd be no more humans. No one around to feed the two babies I'd already birthed, either. No one to replace that one with this new one.

Finally I've figured out how to put them to my breast. It's only now, with Seth, that I've learned how to lift him without the bruising or swellings that hardened under my skin in the months after Cain and Abel were born. He bumps his head against me, mouth open and searching. He lays his hand against my skin as he suckles, smiles up at me, his mouth stretched around my nipple, sighs in pleasure. But it took losing Abel to learn it, and here's me with no girls to teach it to. Just these boys, full of jealousy, and murderous. One dead, the other gone. Where to, I have no idea. We found the body in a field, his head bashed in, face and neck covered in blood already turning to brown, and his brother disappeared. I lost two in one moment, and I felt a gash open in my stomach at the sight of that boy, whom I had brought into the world at the cost, almost, of my own life.

Who was there to teach me what a mother feels when she loses a son? Not God. He'd retreated somewhere beyond our vision. Not Adam, who clasped his hands together, looked down at the ground, and then spent the night with his back turned to me.

When we first found him, I thought he would get back up, his skull would undent, and we four would go

back to how we'd been, growing and tending to the land and animals. I think now that Adam understood at once, but it took me longer to recognize or admit to that fly-covered finality.

It's not that I hadn't seen death. Animals died around us all the time. Mauled, torn apart by predators. Some fell sick or got old and curled up under bushes to depart in peace. One bad winter, we lost almost all the lambs. Adam took those deaths so personally at first, each a brief disappointment. Maybe it hardened him, crushed his first impulse to label, to name each creature as it came before him. Which is why it was left to me to find the right names for my sons.

I didn't make the connection between that body lying twisted on the ground and our own brief lives. I thought people lived by a different set of rules. God spoke to us, after all, even if less and less often as time wore on. Surely that made us special. Surely that meant we'd live forever. Scraped, bruised, broken, yes, but we lived. Adam never lost his limp after a fall off a rock shelf on our travels east out of the Garden, but it didn't kill him. It barely slowed him down. That very night he mounted me with an intensity I had never seen in him before. Not a year passed, and I got rounder and rounder, with rumblings under my heart and God mum on what was happening or why.

There too, I had the lesson of the animals to thank,

how they also got fat and then lay down to push out their young. So I watched and learned. And Cain was an easy birth, slipped out of me like a gift. Now, two hard births later, I know what a mercy that was, how God took pity on me. Or maybe He just fooled me, wanted to show me how carefully I should have attended to His words. At the time, though, I thought—but didn't say, I never said it out loud—that God must have been trying to scare me with His talk of difficult childbirth.

That first time, a little panting, some cramps, and then him, slick and covered in white, his face puffy, but his form a perfect replica of his father's. It seemed a wondrous connection—the beauty of Adam's body making this new thing with me. I was fooled by it, fooled into wanting more, my desire growing stronger as the weeks and then months passed. It was just as God had promised, though I didn't pay close enough attention. My desire was for my husband. I was so young, my body alive to its tiniest sensations. I wanted Adam again and again. After we fled the Garden, wrapped in the skins God had covered us with, we found out what cold was and clung to one another. But the warmth between our bodies made Adam's clothes bulge and his breath quicken. His weight on me, the rocking of his body into mine, made me crave more. Dark came so early in those days. Nights I spent cataloging every part of him, naming and touching—shoulder, elbow, nipple,

stomach, shaft, scrotum. Each a discovery, a new source of delight.

I think now that God must have known how little His words meant to me when He first said them. He must have waited to show me how wrong I had been. He had promised labor, that I would work to bring life into the world. How else to explain the screaming pain of Abel's birth? The pushing and pushing down through my bowels and him not coming, stuck as if in a vessel stoppered with rags. My womb was a cave hiding the clay of his new body from the winds, and it did not want to give him up. Perhaps my body knew, even then, that losing him would be the greater pain.

No, this will not make it into the final account. The men who will come to tell this story will never know that teaching this new baby how to be a man is the important part. They will think the tests ended where punishment began.

I will protect Seth. And he'll be my last. I won't do it again, give over everything in me to make him, only to see him crumbled like a leaf off the tree, the ground mulching to reclaim him.

God didn't tell the whole truth. But I've grown used to that. My desire has changed. It's not for Adam, who continues to reap and plant, reap and plant, whose body grows leaner, his skin slacker, each year. When he turns to me now, I turn away. Everything I have is saved for

Seth, the last of my womb, who has to grow tall, who has to learn better how to survive this world. I have so much to teach him. He needs to know how to speak to God and the world in the languages they understand.

Adam also got it wrong. He focused on the penalties, the pronouncements, on our banishment. But he confused the consequences for the cause. Here's what happened: God said one thing. The snake said another. Which is how I learned that someone had to be lying. That was the knowledge. That was my first step out of the Garden, and no one chasing me with a flaming sword. It wasn't the bite into the fruit or sharing it with Adam. I knew that one of them had told the truth, the other hadn't, and the only way I'd know which was to take the fruit into my hand, into my mouth.

Here is the real lesson. Only God got to say which was good, which bad. Not because of truth. No. He got to decide because we—I—had tasted what it meant to see a future of our own making. That's what He couldn't allow. So He showed us the cost of choosing the wrong truth. Showed us the door and then shut His mouth tight.

Believe me, they're going to get it wrong when they tell my story. They'll miss what it meant to raise my boys. They'll write them off with a sentence. They won't show the mistakes I made, who had no mother to teach me how to love. No father to brush the hair from

my face, the dirt from my scrapes. God was our only model, and we took all the wrong lessons: Adam to walk silently through his life, and me, with my decrees and a quick slap across the face when they were defied.

It took this—one dead, the other disappeared—to see what I could not have known all along. Cain was too much like me, too quick to anger, too quick to hide. I have finally learned. I will do better this time. I won't raise my hand. There is no lesson so urgent it has to end with Seth's cheek bruised and streaked with tears. I never want to see a son of mine cower in fear or hide from my anger. That's my promise, even though no one will ever know it.

None of that will replace my other boy though. It won't restore either of them. I was born twice before, once when I woke next to Adam in the Garden's shade, the green world opening to welcome me, the last of its fruits. Then again with that first rush of water between my legs, the small body cradled to my skin. This is the third time, and the last. I cannot be as I was. Adam named me mother of all the living. Now, mother and mourner both, I finally understand. To be mother of the living is also to be mother to all the dead.

Abel, my son, has come and gone, and I, the ground from which he rose, remain.

They won't write it down. They won't know. But I will not forget.

LOT'S WIFE

*"So Lot went out to them to the entrance,
shut the door behind him, and said, 'I beg you, my
friends, do not commit such a wrong.*

*Look, I have two daughters who have not known
a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you
may do to them as you please; but do not do
anything to these men, since they have come under
the shelter of my roof."*

Genesis 19:6-8

He sat in the small patch of shade, churning the camel's milk to butter. The courtyard was quiet with work, one daughter at the oven baking bread, the other grinding down flour for tomorrow's