
**Reviewed by Rhiannon Grant, University of Leeds, UK**

This book of poems explores a range of Biblical material, taking up the voices of characters and presenting their perspectives on events. The lively and accessible tone of the book makes it an easy read and a potential resource for use with teenagers or similar groups, where a fresh view of a well-known story can breathe new life into a study session. The poems are often witty and skilful with their use of Biblical quotations and allusions, but they are at their best when they combine Biblical stories and modern imagery. For example, a poem early in the book is called "Sarah and Abraham Consult a Fertility Specialist," and – without commenting on what will happen later in the story – it gives the responses of a "Doctor Gomorrah" after his physical examination of the couple. Similarly, a later poem which explores the story from Isaac's perspective offers just a hint of the modern in what is otherwise a story both Biblical and timeless: "My therapist says to read Freud/ and then I'll understand/ Dad's complex behaviour." (p. 11)

Some of the poems do not mix modern and Biblical time in this way, preferring to simply give a character's perspective on the story. One about Dinah, for example, extends the story of her rape from a couple of verses in Genesis to a whole, tormenting poem. The writing does not stress the emotion of the situation but allows it to come through Dinah's actions: "I kicked Shechem's knees and groin… When I awoke… I staggered to a stream and bathed." (p. 20)

Although there is nothing here, which is necessarily modern – unfortunately, the beating and rape of women has existed throughout history – the fresh telling brings it to life and makes it seem relatable, and in that sense modern. Later in the book, the weaving in of poems which deal wholly with today or which take Biblical concepts and explore how they might play out in today's world (one called 'The Sins of the Fathers' begins "Danny plays quietly by himself/at the Domestic Assault Centre", and another, 'Sunday School Lesson' is about the ways in which children engage with the questions faced by Biblical characters) extends this sense of bringing the Biblical world and today's world closer together. The metaphor of weaving seems apt for these shifts because over the course of the whole book, the movement
back and forth across time begins to seem, not quite predictable, but semi-regular, part of a larger pattern.

Although some of the poems deal with well-known male Biblical figures, there is a consistent interest in this book in bringing to light the stories of female Biblical characters, minor characters, and other potentially neglected groups (two of the poems I have already mentioned, 'The Sins of the Fathers' and 'Sunday School Lesson' offer the perspectives of children in relation to Biblical stories). In the very first poem, 'Jana', the familiar figure of Jonah has become a woman, and the gourd, which grows around her, turns out to be a modern hotel: "It had a restaurant and was rest-room equipped." (p. 1) Here, a puzzling Biblical episode becomes no less puzzling but much more relatable because the contrasts involved have been made more real by the reference to familiar experiences. In this way, Heller avoids the dangers of trying to 'explain away' Biblical events – some retellings focus too much on making miracles believable and not on their mythological or symbolic significance – and retain the compelling mystery of many of the stories, while at the same time shedding new light on them by addressing them from different perspectives. For readers who are women, interested in women's issues and/or aware of feminist perspectives on the text, to have this attention paid to the perspectives of women is in itself refreshing.

Overall, I found this book approachable and engaging. It was a quick read on first reading, but also repays a slower reading once the balance of the whole has been appreciated. It would interest anyone wanting to explore Biblical texts from the perspectives of neglected characters, and also those interested in how Biblical stories can be shown to be relevant to today. Although the poems would not mostly be suitable for younger children, I would seriously consider offering some of them to teenagers or to adult Bible study groups, especially where there is a rejection of difficult stories (like Dinah's) or a desire to understand different perspectives on practices such as nidah (the poem 'Nidah (The Menstruant)' deals with this directly). The clear and accessible writing style would make one of these short poems an ideal companion piece to a Biblical passage for personal or group reflection.