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A group of women meet on a remote and paradisal island to tell their stories. Only these are biblical women who have never died, some well known, others less so. They interweave, in their presentations, narrative, exegesis, reflection on their fates in ancient and modern commentary, poetic and dramatic recreations, their relationships. They tell their afterlives. Their convener—whose identity remains half-hidden until the end of the book, when she tells her story—is a medium, a communicator, a resuscitator of the forgotten aspects of the past, and as such a marvelous persona for the author, Athalya Brenner, for whose work in the feminist and cultural-critical reading of the Bible we are all indebted. As we might expect, it is formidably rich, acerbic, serious, and moving. It is a playful exercise in imaginative fictions, but as with all play and fiction, it is much, much more.

In the preface, Brenner describes some of the discontents that led her to this work: a discontent with the scholarly quest for reality and truth at the expense of all excluded aspects of the text, such as its relationship to nationalism; her chafing at the institutionalized dullness of academic writing; her sense that she could not or would not write best-selling fiction; her wish to create a hybrid of scholarly and imaginative discourse. She also recounts her inspirations, in particular the volume *First Person*...
(Sheffield, 2002), edited by Philip Davies and the late Robert Carroll, to which both of us contributed, and also two of her abiding concerns: the cultural impact of these texts in general and in the Israeli context in particular. No one who has attempted fictional autobiography will underestimate how difficult it is or how compelling is Brenner’s achievement.

Brenner is at her best when she has her women talk to each other. For example, Ruth tells her story, interesting and thoughtful but not especially original, and then Orpah and Naomi have their say, and we see the same story from shockingly and radically different perspectives. Tamar and Tamar talk to and through each other, realize their similarities and their terrible differences. Adah and Zillah delightfully interweave their reflections on the etymology of their names and their significance as the mothers of culture. At other times, we have embedded echoes or reflections of relationships, between Rizpah, Michal, and Merab, between Zipporah and Miriam, “my friend, my empathizing if often reserved ally” (75).

Secondly, her literary analogues and recreations are illuminating, sometimes funny, and open our minds to new constellations. Zipporah’s name associates her with bird women and flying women, from the harpies to the Arabian Nights and Erica Jong; I am not sure how all these figures are related, but they enable us to imagine another life, another literary life, alongside the masculine heritage of Moses. Dinah’s voice is restored by Tchernikovsky, one of the great modern Hebrew poets, who makes her into a mother of a tribe and grants her an undiminished rage over her violation that contrasts with most modern, and even some feminist, mollifications. But Tchernikovsky, Brenner says, kills his Dinah, just as Poe kills his Scheherezade, while Brenner’s Dinah is very much alive. Rizpah’s ordeal is dramatized by two Hebrew dramatists of the 1940s, one unreadable, the other capturing, despite its moralism, her affinity to animals.

Thirdly, the afterlives Brenner invents for her characters are poetically apt. Zeruiah, mother of the fraternal heroes Joab, Asahel, and Abishai, becomes one of the women in black, protesting against the occupation. Zipporah is a cofounder of a women’s aviation coop, together with Bird Woman and some others. Rahab still lives in Jericho and watches developments between Israel and the Palestinians with horror and a sense of déjà-vù.

The volume is not perfect. At times the creative, fictional voice lapses into straight exposition. The Shulammite devotes about twenty pages to Brenner’s thesis that the wasf, or formal portrait, of Song of Songs 7:1–7 is comic and parodic. This may well be true, but I thought it did not go beyond Brenner’s previous arguments on the subject and did not give a sense of the Shulammite as a living, credible, and amorous person, with her
own views on life and love, and her own voice, things Brenner accomplishes brilliantly elsewhere in the volume. Similarly, in her rather short intervention, Huldah explains her inaccurate prediction that Josiah would die peacefully in his bed as an act of compassion. Again, in the world of fiction anything is possible, but I did not think this was a very interesting explication.

These issues aside, it is hard to overstate what a wonderfully rich and beautiful book this is. Brenner has a good ear for the right phrase, that which will illuminate a situation and its social implications. Rahab’s account of how she entered her trade and its ramifications for her family is a superb instance. It is also a moral, deeply felt book, and highly recommended to all readers.