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Menu



Illuminating the biblical text

According to the dictionary, the word illuminate means “to enlighten someone intellectually or spiritually.” This can be done in a variety of ways. For example, Debra Band uses illustrations (which she calls illuminations) to offer commentary and insights into the biblical text.

In her third book, “Arise! Arise! Deborah, Ruth and Hannah” (Honeybee in the Garden), Band focuses on three biblical stories featuring women as main characters. Although additional literary commentary is offered by Arnold J. Band, her father-in-law, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at UCLA, the real stars of the book are Band’s illuminations, which are beautiful enough to stand on their own.

Band chose to illuminate these three selections because they tell “stories of women who stood up at crucial moments to take actions that not only preserved the nascent nation of Israel but also shaped its character.” Although all take place during the same period of Israelite history, they are in different biblical books.

The story of Deborah is found in the book of Judges and the tale of Hannah in I Samuel, both of which are in Nevi'im (Prophets). The story Ruth is in the Book of Ruth, which, in the Hebrew Bible, is placed in the final section, Ketuvim (Writings).

“Arise! Arise!” really tells the stories of five women: Ruth, Naomi, Hannah, Deborah and Jael. The accounts of three women—Ruth, Naomi and Hannah—focus on their domestic lives, specifically marriage and children.

The remaining two women offer a more heroic mode: Deborah leads the

Israelites into battle, while Jael kills Sisera, the military leader of the Canaanites, after offering him refuge and hospitality. Band explores the different roles they played in her illuminations.

Band refers to her illuminations as visual midrash, seeing them as a continuation of the verbal commentary offered in rabbinical sources. Not only are the works filled with imagery drawn from the time period in which the stories occur (the 11th or 12th centuries B.C.E.), they offer interpretations of the text based on a variety of archeological and textual sources. Band's commentary explains the symbols used in her illuminations, but it's possible to enjoy the artwork by itself.

My favorite illumination combine drawing and text (in Hebrew and English) together throughout the page. Some drawings appear without text while other sections focus on the story, but even these contain designs that highlight the meaning of the text. Readers may find themselves turning pages to enjoy the book visually before focusing on the stories.

Band has once again done an excellent job using visual arts to illuminate the emotions and events found in the biblical text. Her book would make an excellent bat mitzvah or wedding present, although its appeal is not limited to women. Anyone interested in the emerging field of visual midrash will want to explore "Arise! Arise!"

By [Rabbi Rachel Easserman](#)

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