

# NeverEnding Stories: Women and the Bible in Four Canadian Novels

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*"Sometimes we have no alternative but to make up a history or remain bereft."*<sup>1</sup>

Our familiarity with women in the Bible has increased exponentially in the last four decades as a growing number of female biblical scholars bring new questions and insights to that venerable text. The tools of biblical criticism have helped sketch out the cultural and religious contexts in which biblical women lived and biblical hermeneutics provide methods for reading the texts in which they appear. But it is not only scrutiny of ancient texts that furthers our acquaintance with biblical women. The Bible is more than an historical artefact; it is a living book, part of an ongoing conversation about who we are in relation to one another and to God. That conversation takes place on many fronts, in many quarters, not least among them in the pages of contemporary novels. In biblical stories in which women figure we often catch no more than glimpses of long-lost lives, and the stories often tell us more about the men who wrote them than the women themselves. No matter how much we interrogate any particular text, asking questions about context, authorship, purpose and bias, information about the particular experiences of women captured there is highly circumscribed. We must look elsewhere.

The Bible not as artefact but as a living entity is implied in what has become a model for feminist biblical studies, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's four hermeneutical principles. One begins with a hermeneutics of suspicion, an interpretive approach that recognizes the patriarchy and androcentrism of many biblical texts and critiques them, asking what interests are being served. A hermeneutics of proclamation assesses which texts are suitable for liturgical use. A hermeneutics of remembrance searches the texts for traces of women's history, and a hermeneutics of creative actualization

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1. Deena Metzger, *Writing for Your Life*. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 69.

helps women claim biblical history through a creative re-imagination of “the suffering, struggles, and victories of our biblical foresters and foremothers.”<sup>2</sup> It is through imaginative engagement that we meet our biblical sisters; it is there that we can share our lives and fears and hopes. It is there that the conversation about who we are in relation to one another and to God is continued.

One arena in which this conversation unfolds is the world of fiction. In the pages below I consider four Canadian novels that feature biblical themes and characters, and the dynamic created between the biblical and modern texts. The novels engage biblical material in quite different ways. The main character of Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* (McClelland and Stewart, 1964) shares little more than a name with the Hagar of the Hebrew Scriptures, but the naming evokes a shared heritage as well. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (McClelland and Stewart, 1985) brings forward not so much biblical characters as a certain biblical ethos in its depiction of women in the near-future theocracy of Gilead. In *Our Lady of the Lost and Found*, by Diane Schoemperlen (Harper Flamingo Canada, 2001), the Virgin Mary appears to a woman writer with no great interest in apparitions, and stays to visit for a week. Nino Ricci's *Testament* (Doubleday Canada, 2002) retells the Jesus story through the eyes of four of his contemporaries, one of whom is Mary Magdalene. A vast temporal and geographic range is represented here, from a fictional recreation of first century Palestine in *Testament* to Atwood's future American republic, with stops along the way in Manitoba and Ontario. In that range a space for dialogue opens as the reader enters into the fictional worlds created. Reading is by no means a passive activity. In the process of reading characters come to life in the imaginative play-space of the reader's mind, and the reader enters into relationship with them, even friendship. This kinship can then become a lens through which biblical texts are re-read and re-interpreted—and new vistas are disclosed.

## The Stone Angel

*The Stone Angel* gives us Hagar Shipley, a 90-year old woman looking back over an unhappy life. Now living with her elder son Marvin, she is

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2. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 54–55.

an angry, defiant, disappointed and often disappointing woman whose many years have left her confused and unconsolated. Hagar is “rampant with memory” (5) as she recalls her youth in Manawaka, Manitoba and her marriage to Brampton Shipley, a man she grew quickly to despise. She remembers the day she left her husband—her younger son, John, in tow—and found a position and a measure of respectability as a housekeeper to an aging gentleman. She leads an uneventful life in Mr. Oatley’s house until John returns to Manawaka and his father, and Hagar follows. All ends in death. Bram dies of liver failure after years of drink, John dies after his car is hit by a train, himself to blame, and decades later, Hagar herself dies, at some measure of peace but brusque to the very end.

The biblical Hagar is no more than a fleeting shadow infrequently evoked by Laurence, but the references enrich the stories of both women. The Hagar of Genesis was the Egyptian maidservant of Sarah, wife of the patriarch Abraham. She makes only brief appearances, her existence worthy of note primarily because she gave birth to a patriarch’s son (Genesis 16; 21:9–21; 25:12–16). The childless Sarah gave Hagar to her husband so that she would have a child through her, a practice not unknown in the ancient Near East where a woman’s value was weighed in terms of her capacity to bear sons. When Hagar did conceive and showed disdain for Sarah, Sarah treated her so badly that she ran away, but in the wilderness she was instructed by an angel to return and submit to Sarah, encouraged by the promise of numerous descendants. Hagar found herself in exile a second time after Sarah herself gave birth to a son and drove Hagar and her child away. In the wilderness, without water, the child wailed and wept; God heeded his cry, opened Hagar’s eyes to a well, and declared that her son would be made into a great nation. Hagar’s last recorded act is choosing for her son an Egyptian wife.

Hagar Shipley bears several marks of the biblical Hagar—her name, first and foremost. Her husband’s name, Brampton, recalls another husband, Abraham. An Egyptian backdrop is evoked: Hagar’s father is described as a fledgling pharaoh (3), and she herself is “the Egyptian, not dancing now with rowanberries in her hair, but sadly altered,” as she sits bloated and uncomfortable with the minister who has come to call (40). Both Hagars are watched over by angels. After fleeing to the wilderness, the angel of Yahweh met the first near a spring. She is instructed to return, but is not completely powerless. She names Yahweh as El Roi, “the one who sees me”(Genesis

16:13). While the act of seeing is prominent here, it is blindness which characterizes Hagar Shipley's angel. Hers is a stone angel marking her mother's grave, standing on a hill above the town. "Summer and winter she viewed the town with sightless eyes" (3).

Both Hagars choose to flee when faced with an unbearable situation, the first to the desert to escape abuse, and her namesake to a half-remembered picnic place after she learns she is to go to a nursing home. The old woman takes refuge in an abandoned building and is soon parched with thirst, but she is saved by a gang of sparrows who lead her to a pail of murky rainwater (187), her well in the desert. Both Hagars return home for the sake of their sons, and both fear the death of a son. In the desert without water, Hagar places her son under a bush and sat at a distance, saying to herself "If he should die, let me not see it" (Genesis 20:16). Hagar Shipley recalls those same words as she sits with her favoured and dying son in a hospital after he was severely injured in a car crash (241). Most significantly, the two Hagars share a bondage, one a literal slavery and the other an emotional one. Hagar Shipley has an epiphany in the last days of her life when she realizes that all she ever wanted was simply to rejoice, to feel joy in a relationship or even the plain light of morning, but held back from it for the sake of proper appearances: "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear . . . I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched" (292).

It is common to consider biblical allusions in any work of literature in terms of how those allusions enrich the text under consideration. Such allusions often provide a context, a history, and layers of meaning that extend the reader's understanding of fictional characters and situations. It is less common, but also valid, to ask how the fictional characterizations illumine and extend the meaning of the biblical text. The proud and headstrong Hagar Shipley invites us to inquire newly into the biblical Hagar. We know nothing of the inner life of the Hagar in Genesis. We are told something of how she acted and was acted upon, but her own voice is silent. What did she say, what did she think, when instructed by the angel of Yahweh to go back to her mistress and submit to her? (16:9) "Can they force me?" asks Hagar Shipley when Marvin and his wife take her to visit the nursing home in which they wish to place her. "If I fuss and fume, will they . . . strap me into harness, will they? Make a madwoman of me? I fear this place exceedingly" (96). Surely the biblical Hagar was also overcome

with fear, driven mad, perhaps, at being returned to an abusive situation, yet this is given no voice. Nor is her ultimate fate. What did she see when she looked back upon her life? Hagar Shipley looks back over ninety years of heartbreak and disappointment. The biblical Hagar disappeared still a young woman, finding a wife for her son. Did she live to see his children? Did she look back on her life in old age and ponder a God of infinite mercy who gifted her with a son and with twelve grandsons, or a God indifferent to her prayers and pleadings? Perhaps she said, with her namesake, this: "I can't change what's happened to me in my life, or make what's not occurred take place. But I can't say I like it, or accept it, or believe it's for the best. I don't and never shall, not even if I'm damned for it" (160).

God features in the lives of both women largely in terms of indifference. The God of Genesis instructs the pregnant Hagar to return to her abusive mistress presumably concerned for her unborn son, and it is that same son whose cries God heeds in the wilderness; Hagar's own despair does not move the unmoved mover. Hagar Shipley's God is similarly cast. She tells the minister that she's never had much use for prayer because nothing ever came of it, and when asked about her belief in God's infinite mercy, blurts "what's so merciful about Him, I'd like to know?" (120).

Margaret Laurence, "having seen Hagar as an essentially tragic figure, . . . has placed her in a modern setting and explored her point of view."<sup>3</sup> One cannot help but admire the capacity for rage in Laurence's main character. She will not go gently into that good night of death.<sup>4</sup> Her deteriorating body and failing faculties cannot completely undermine the passionate spirit that has directed her life, and more often misdirected it. Her voice gives voice to a woman who lived thousands of years earlier, to her pride, to her fear, to her anger at God. In the hospital before her death, Hagar realizes and regrets that her grandson knows almost nothing of her: "I'm choked with it now, the incommunicable years, everything that happened and was spoken or not spoken . . . Someone should know. This is what I think. *Someone really ought to know these things*" (296). Now we can.

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3. William H. New, Introduction to *The Stone Angel*, by Margaret Laurence (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), viii–ix.

4. Epigraph to the *Stone Angel*: "Do not go gentle into that good night./ Rage, rage against the dying of the light," by Dylan Thomas.

## The Handmaid's Tale

An exploited womb links *The Handmaid's Tale* to the Hagar alluded to in *The Stone Angel*. The handmaid of Margaret Atwood's dystopia is a woman assigned to serve as a two-legged womb in the near-future Republic of Gilead. Fanatically conservative Christians have taken control in the U.S. at a time when nuclear wastes, pesticides and disease have left most women infertile. Handmaids serve as surrogate mothers for sterile wives of the Commanders of the Faithful, the elite officials of the strictly controlled theocratic order. The Republic is patriarchy writ large. Women are not permitted to hold jobs, own property, even read and write. A caste system is imposed which classifies women according to their duties and fertility: the Wives of the men in power, the Handmaids who are assigned to bear their children, the Aunts who train the handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Centre, the servant-class Marthas who do the domestic work, and the Unwomen, those sent to the colonies to clean up toxic waste. In the Bible, fertility is the great divide, as between Hagar and Sarah, Rachel and Leah. So too in Gilead, where "there is no such thing as a sterile man any more, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that is the law" (70–71).

The Republic's operating manual is the Bible, or rather, select portions thereof. The handmaids are justified by Genesis 30:1–3 wherein the barren Rachel gives her maid to Jacob so that she might have children by her. Scriptures are both all pervasive and under lock and key. In the centre where handmaids are prepared for their postings, "the usual stories" are read every breakfast: "God to Adam, God to Noah. *Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth*" (99). "For lunch it was the Beatitudes. Blessed be this, blessed be that . . . *Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the silent*" (100). Offred, the narrator of the story, knows that the latter does not appear in the Bible, but there is no way to check. "The Bible is kept locked up . . . It is an incendiary device: who knows what we'd make of it, if we ever got our hands on it?" (98). The comment is telling, and reflective of the ways the Bible has been used historically. Select passages have been used to keep women in check, St. Paul's injunction for women to keep silent and submit to their husbands prominent among them. But the Bible has also been an "incendiary device," particularly when in the hands of the oppressed who seek deliverance from their oppression. Adherents of

liberation theologies around the world see in it a call for transformation of extant political, social and economic relations. What one makes of the Bible does indeed depend on who has got their hands on it.

The narrator, Offred, is a woman in her early 30s. As she tells of her life after having been captured attempting to flee to Canada and assigned as handmaid to one of the commanders she also recalls her previous life, which has been stripped of all those things that had previously characterized it—home, family, possessions, clothes. The only things truly hers are her thoughts and memories. That even the narrator's given name is lost to us puts her well in the company of the many biblical women who remain nameless. They are featured primarily in relation to a male and his progeny; their own identities, personalities and opinions are largely irrelevant. In Gilead, Offred is "of Fred." Her assigned name is a reflection of Gileadean androcentrism, concern with patrilineality, and a concerted effort to erase the self she used to be. Offred reflects on the significance of names: "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, . . . but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter" (94). Offred will not let her given name be lost: "I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day" (94). This is the task also of both feminist biblical scholarship and the writing of fiction—to dig up the treasure of hidden lives.

*The Handmaid's Tale* ends at an academic conference in Gileadean studies some two centuries after the events recounted. At the podium, Professor Pieixoto discusses Offred's taped testimony of her life in Gilead, and notes that her ultimate fate is unknown.

Did our narrator reach the outside world safely and build a new life for herself? Or was she discovered in her attic hiding place . . . .Our document, though in its own way eloquent, is on these subjects mute . . . .As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come; and, try as we may, we cannot always decipher them precisely in the clearer light of our own day (323–4).

This is an eloquent expression of the challenges that confront us as we grapple with biblical texts as well: the past is a great darkness. Fictional re-conceptualizations of biblical material help to shed some light.

## Our Lady of the Lost and Found

As with Offred, the promise of a fertile womb figures prominently in the story of Jesus' mother Mary. The Mary of the Gospels is an ambiguous character. In Mark, the earliest of the Gospels, she appears only once: thinking Jesus out of his mind, she attempts to take charge of him while he was preaching to the crowds (Mark 3:20–21; 31–35). In Matthew, an infancy narrative provides for a more sustained depiction. The virginal Mary is betrothed to Joseph and pregnant through the Holy Spirit. An angel appears to Joseph to reassure him, and Mary is accepted into his home. Joseph is the active figure here, the one to whom angels appear; Mary is silent (Matthew 1–2). It is in Luke's Gospel that we first hear Mary's voice. It is here that the angel Gabriel announces to her that she will bear a son who will be great and will be called Son of the Most High (Matthew 1:32): "I am the handmaid of the Lord," said Mary, "let what you have said be done to me" (Matthew 1:38). Mary is active in this rendition: she accepts God's favour; she sets out to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, she rejoices in the Magnificat, the great prayer of praise for God and the reversal of the social order in which the lowly are exalted and the hungry filled with good things (Matthew 1:46–55). In John's Gospel she is never referred to by name, only by relationship and gender: mother, woman. She is first seen at a wedding at Cana where she appeals to Jesus when the wine has finished (John 2:1–12), and it is only in this account that Mary is with Jesus at his death (John 19:25–27).

"Traditions about Mary the mother of Jesus ultimately became so central in Christianity that many readers may be surprised to see how few of these are found in the New Testament itself."<sup>5</sup> The Mary of the Gospels is a marginal figure, one who provides the conditions of possibility for the birth of Jesus. She may have embraced this prospect willingly, as in Luke, or had very little say in the matter, as in Matthew. She may have understood her son's powers, as at the wedding in Cana, or not at all, as in Mark when she and his siblings think him mad. Nonetheless, over the centuries Mary has

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5. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer, "Mary 1" in ed. Carol Meyers, *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 116.



become an icon. She is perpetual virgin, Mother of God and Mother of the Church. She is honoured by millions as immaculate: sinlessly conceived, she humbly answered God's call to bear the Christ-child and was rewarded with an escape from the indignity of death through her bodily ascension into heaven. She is also busy. Mary has appeared to believers and non-believers alike on occasions too numerous to count. Mary makes the news "more often than you might expect of a woman who has been dead for almost two thousand years."<sup>6</sup>

The price one pays for such greatness is high, according to Diane Schoemperlen's fictional witness in *Our Lady of the Lost and Found*. The many appearances of Mary to the faithful throughout the world and ages have left her weary, and she needs a break. She decides to take that break in the home of a novelist, making her appearance under a fig tree in the narrator's house "wearing a navy blue trench coat and white running shoes" (30). Imagine being visited by the mother of God. "Lamb of the Redeemer. Queen of Heaven. Pilgrim of Peace. Daughter of Zion. Ark of the Covenant. Fount of Beauty. Summit of Virtue. Sublime Peak of Human Intellect" (30). You might fall on your knees in adoration. You might be struck dumb with fear and wonder. You do not open a can of soup for the two of you for lunch! But this is precisely what the narrator of Schoemperlen's novel does: prepares some soup, cuts some tomatoes, puts out black olives (of which Mary is not particularly fond), and lunch is served. The conversation? No mention of the famous son or the likelihood of virgin births. The talk is of nutrition and interior decorating.

The narrator has reservations about Mary's presence, but Mary's request is such a modest one, a place to stay for a week to rest up before the month of May when much would be expected of her, that the narrator acquiesces. It is the most uneventful of weeks; they cook and shop and have long chats. While there are no wondrous feats (apart from Mary's miraculous appearance in the narrator's living room and one brief departure to save the life of a drowning boy twelve hundred miles away), there is much talk of them as Mary tells stories of her life and the narrator records her research on the Virgin after her departure. After centuries of numerous apparitions and miracles, it is no wonder Mary needs some time to herself!

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6. Diane Schoemperlen, *Our Lady of the Lost and Found* (Toronto: Harper Flamingo Canada, 2001), 49.

*Our Lady of the Lost and Found* stresses two things simultaneously: how extraordinarily influential Mary has been throughout history, and how simply ordinary she is. The narrator states that after Mary's departure she began an "excursion into the vast body of Marian literature." "I think it is safe to assume that Mary has been the subject of more literature, art, and music than any other woman in all of history" (101). One need not believe in Mary in order to believe that stories about her have had a powerful impact on innumerable people; lives have been dramatically changed and landscapes altered where shrines have been established. She is "the most influential, inspirational, and significant woman in the history of the world" (290). Given this context, it is quite remarkable that this novel gives back to Mary her common, every-day humanity. There is nothing particularly extraordinary in the exchanges between Mary and the narrator of Schoemperlen's novel; she is simply a woman who needs a vacation.

When Mary leaves after the week is over, the narrator is bereft, the reader too, for they both have come to grow fond of this woman who looks just like them. Mary has become a friend, so ordinary that strangers do not look twice as you walk together down the street.

## Testament

Mary Magdalene is the anomaly in the company considered here insofar as her womb is not a focal point. She is one of the few biblical women who is not introduced in relation to husband, father or son. She is Mary from Magdala, Miryam of Migdal in Nino Ricci's *Testament*. Ricci's novel takes us to ancient Palestine, and tells the story of Jesus from the perspective of four of his contemporaries: Judas, Mary Magdalene, his mother Mary, and the Syrian Simon of Gergesa, a non-biblical character and non-Jew who follows Jesus both out of fascination and to experience the wider world. The four quite different descriptions of Jesus mimic the four Gospels, but depart from them insofar as they strip Jesus of the veneer of divinity and present him as a man of uncommon power who drew others to him through tantalizing glimpses of expanded possibilities.

“Unlike the four recorders of the Gospels, these narrators are ‘removed from the myth and closer to the man,’ according to Ricci.”<sup>7</sup> In like fashion, readers of Mary Magdalene’s testament are “removed from the myth and closer to the woman.” The Mary of the Gospels is a disciple of Jesus, described as a woman from whom seven demons had been cast out (Luke 8:2–3). She is faithful to Jesus to the end, present during his crucifixion, witness to the empty tomb, and in John’s Gospel, the first to whom Jesus appears. Here she is “apostle to the apostles,” sent to the others to tell them that Jesus had risen from the dead. Yet this faithful disciple has been cast as a repentant prostitute over the centuries, figuratively stripped of her stature as prominent among Jesus’ disciples and often literally stripped as well—a significant amount of art work depicting Mary as a beautiful and scantily clad woman mourning her sins can readily be described as little more than pious pornography.<sup>8</sup> There are no demons expelled from Ricci’s Mary, nor is she associated with any “sins of the flesh.” Miryam, the unmarried daughter of a Jewish fish curer and his Gentile wife, meets Yeshua (Jesus) when her father finds him preaching outside the Tiberias gates and invites him to their home. Yeshua speaks with Miryam as no man had ever spoken, with words that touched the inmost part of her (128). No ravishing or ravished beauty, as often visually portrayed, she is described as plain, and while of marriageable age, she has no interest in marriage: “When I imagined myself as a mother or bride, it seemed a sort of death, though I didn’t hate these things and couldn’t say what other future it was I intended for myself, since there was none” (126). What Yeshua offers is another future, one in which Miryam could travel the roads of Galilee, have respect and see things differently (210), freed from expectations that trapped her in her “woman’s skin” (208).

Miryam is a woman of insight and intelligence who is drawn to Jesus because he opens up the world to her, literally and conceptually. Mary’s conversations with Jesus are such that: “it was as if a door had suddenly opened, or a passage been granted to a country you’d hoped might exist but had never quite dared to imagine” (128). She is also profoundly attracted

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7. Malika Hollander, “Life of Jesus retold in new novel Testament,” *The Telegram*, St. John’s, Nfld., 12 May 2002, B.4.

8. FutureChurch, “Mary of Magdala – Apostle to the Apostles,” <http://www.futurechurch.org/marym/index.htm> (accessed May 28, 2007).

to Jesus and they embrace openly, much to the embarrassment of onlookers (128). But when a plot is hatched to accuse Yeshua of seduction, it is not Miryam but another who is named, Ribqah, a girl whom Jesus had saved from the abuse of her father. This attempt to discredit Jesus through accusations of sexual impropriety echoes a similar accusation against Mary Magdalene that is made not in the biblical texts themselves, but in subsequent biblical commentary. In the early centuries of Western Christianity, Mary Magdalene became conflated with the woman forgiven her sins after washing Jesus' feet with her tears (Luke 7:36–50), and transformed from faithful disciple to repentant prostitute. What better way to undermine the authority of a holy man or an independent woman than to denounce them as guilty of sexual sin?

The Gospel of Luke suggests that Mary followed and served Jesus out of gratitude for having been healed of seven demons. Ricci's Miryam is drawn to Jesus not out of gratitude but by way of intellect and compassion. She feels deeply for Jesus, and is convinced she fathoms Jesus better than his male followers (155). She appreciates in Jesus the highest form of teaching: that which leads students to discover the truth for and within themselves. But Miryam is by no means painted as the ideal disciple, a foil to the often-floundering male disciples, as sometimes characterized in contemporary retrievals. She is a complex character, fiercely drawn to Jesus but not immune to confusion and doubt. She fears the growing opposition to Yeshua's teaching and is bewildered by the wonders that flow from him in the power of his healing touch. The last words of her testimony reveal the ambiguity that lies at the heart of her relationship with a Jesus who was both known to her and ultimately unknowable. "Everyone who heard him or laid eyes on him formed an image of him, and believed him a holy man or a madman, a heretic or a sage, with deepest certainty. Yet I who was among those closest to him . . . could not say what it was that formed him, and indeed as the days passed and the weeks and the years, only knew him less" (223).

In *Wisdom Ways*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza discusses imaginative interpretive methods which "actualize biblical stories in role-play, storytelling, bibliodrama, dance, and song. In order to break the marginalizing and obliterating tendencies of the kyriocentric text, feminists tell biblical stories in which wo/men are silenced or not present at all in a

different key and with a *difference*.” “One way to tell a story differently is asking the ‘*what if*’ questions: What if Eve had given birth to Adam? What if Miryam had become the founder and leader of Israel? What if we had as many letters of Mary of Magdala as we have from Paul?”<sup>10</sup> In *Testament*, we have one answer to the question: What if Mary Magdalene told her story of Jesus? We might see an intelligent, complex woman who had many reasons for following Jesus. We might see a woman flawed and faithful. We might see the person who looks at us in the mirror.

## Textual Relations

What is the relationship between these contemporary novels and the Bible? Certainly a familiarity with the scriptures helps one to better appreciate the allusions and nuances of subsequent literary works which refer to biblical themes and characters. Is the reverse also true? Can contemporary literary works contribute to our understanding of biblical women and the Bible itself? The response to this question hinges on one’s understanding of the way in which texts convey meaning. In *Women in Scripture*, Alice Ogden Bellis notes that there are a number of ways to approach biblical texts.

On one end of the continuum—we’ll call it the right-hand end—the text is viewed as the product of authors and editors, the goal is to determine the intention of the authors and editors at various stages in the process that resulted in the final form of the text . . . On the left end of the continuum is the reader’s understanding of the text. The goal is neither the author’s or editor’s intention of the text’s meaning, but what the reader understands the text to mean. Again, it might seem that what the text says and what the interpreter understands it to mean should be the same. In reality, because of the multivalence of the text and the various perspectives interpreters bring to the text, the reader’s understandings are not necessarily synonymous with the bare text.<sup>11</sup>

On the right-end of the continuum, interpretation of “the final form of the text” is the proper order of business; meaning is excavated from

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9. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Orbis, 2001), 148.

10. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 149.

11. Alice Ogden Bellis, “Feminist Biblical Scholarship,” in *Women in Scripture*, 29.

the words on the page. The text is the focal point. One can re-translate the text (correcting inaccuracies, for instance), look behind it (to the cultural context in which it was written, conceivably), read between the lines (to the interests promoted, for example), embrace or disavow it, but the text itself is paramount. On the left end of the continuum, the meaning of any text is not conveyed by the words on the page alone, but is constructed in the dynamic between the text and the reader's history/knowledge/imagination. "Reader-response criticism sees the 'meaning' of the text less as something imprinted on it by its author . . . as something which emerges from the interplay between reader and text . . ." <sup>12</sup> The reader brings to any reading her life experience, which in turn shapes interpretation. "Reader-response criticism has pointed out that we 'make meaning' in the process of reading by imaginatively filling in the gaps, fissures, and breaks in the text with reference to our experience and knowledge." <sup>13</sup>

Reading contemporary novels in tandem with biblical texts can contribute to both interpretive approaches. On the one hand, the novels presented here contribute to biblical studies insofar as they provide a vehicle through which new questions can be addressed to the text. "Biblical scholarship . . . is a well-developed, centuries-old discipline," yet its discoveries "have had relatively no impact on the general public. Most people today approach scriptural texts pre-critically, in much the same way that they have for the past two millennia." <sup>14</sup> Placing the fictional accounts presented here alongside the Bible challenges a pre-critical reading of it since each interrupts the biblical narrative. *The Stone Angel*, for instance, can lead to questions about Hagar's reaction to her bondage. Did she rail against it or acquiesce? Who was the Hebrew God to her? A figure of compassion or one who condoned and ensured her continued servitude? The biblical text yields no answer to these questions. We can know nothing of Hagar's inner life because it was of no interest to the biblical authors and *is not there*. This in turn elicits further questions which *can* be addressed. What can we make of the author/editor's interests in the portrayal of the drama among

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12. Jenny Dines, "The Bible as a Resource for Women," in ed. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, *An A to Z of Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 19.

13. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 183.

14. Carol Meyers, "An Introduction to the Bible," in *Women in Scripture*, 1.

the principals in the scene? The scriptural narrative presents Hagar as a secondary figure who is little more than a pawn in the hands of Abraham, Sarah and God, to be used and sacrificed as the plot to establish Abraham's promised lineage moves forward. Descendants are promised to both Abraham and Hagar, but a covenant with God accompanies that promise for the former but not the latter. Why? Pursuit of these questions leads one into issues of authorial/editorial bias and solidly into biblical criticism.

*The Handmaid's Tale* and *Testament* can also foster a shift in the biblical reader from a pre-critical to critical stance. *The Handmaid's Tale* accosts the reader with the way the Bible can be used and abused. The novel writes into the future biblical perspectives and practices which define women in terms of fertility. The ruling elite use the Bible to support a state of control and suppression, making of it a "text of terror," to use Phillis Trible's terminology. The history of biblical interpretation and application comes into play here, as well as questions about contemporary uses of scripture in debates about conception, abortion and women's roles. After reading *The Handmaid's Tale*, the reader turns to the Bible with a "hermeneutics of suspicion that places on all biblical texts the warning 'Caution—could be dangerous to your health and survival'."<sup>15</sup> *Testament* makes visible the mechanics of myth-making. In each of the testimonies the narrators tell of the elaboration and manipulation of stories about Jesus. "The subtle differences between [Ricci's] testimonies from Judas, the two Marys, and Peter [sic] force us to consider the opportunities for creative addition, alteration, and interpretation as stories about Jesus were handed through innumerable readers."<sup>16</sup> *Testament* can also raise the issue of the character of biblical texts. Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza notes that "biblical readers are generally not aware that biblical histories are neither reports of events nor transcripts of facts but rather rhetorical constructions that have shaped the information available to their authors in light of their religious or political interests."<sup>17</sup> Attentive *Testament* readers are acutely aware that the "histories" therein are shaped by the gender, personal history, religious

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15. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 175.

16. Ron Charles, "What shall I do then with Jesus? *The Christian Science Monitor*, 15 May 2003, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0515/p18s02-bogn.htm> (accessed June 7, 2006).

17. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 146.

heritage and political leanings of the respective narrators, insights that in turn can be applied to readings of the Bible.

Novels can inspire new ways to approach biblical texts, but do much more than that if we look to the left-end of the continuum of biblical interpretation described by Ogden Bellis. Here the focus is not only various ways of approaching the biblical text but also *who* approaches it and *with what*. Meaning is derived from the interplay between reader and text, and “the reader’s understandings are not necessarily synonymous with the bare text.”<sup>18</sup> When the subject is “Women and the Bible,” it is not an overstatement to refer to a “barren text.” The Bible was written primarily by men and for men; women get short shrift. Biblical women are seldom fully developed characters, so it is left to the imagination “to fill in the gaps and silences, and thereby to make sense out of a text.” Imaginative construction is not an ancillary interpretive moment. “Historical imagination . . . is absolutely necessary for any knowledge of biblical texts and worlds.”<sup>19</sup>

We are not restricted in our knowledge of biblical women to the scrutiny of ancient texts if by knowledge we mean something more than the piling-up of information. To truly know someone requires entering into an intimate relationship with her. That “knowledge of” has a necessary relational component is an ancient insight. In biblical times, knowledge of something or someone implied intimacy, but that particular approach to knowledge was undercut with the advent of the scientific revolution, where it was presumed that true knowledge was acquired through coolly rational and objective methods. It was precisely “distance from” and “exhaustive examination of” that ensured accuracy; intimacy could only cloud one’s judgement. But when it comes to biblical material about women, we are left longing if we restrict ourselves to supposedly objective analysis of texts.

Novels provide the conditions of possibility for intimacy. In *Our Lady of the Lost and Found*, Mary becomes a friend. She is wise and funny, a welcome houseguest. The novel undermines the centuries of pious accretions that bear Mary down while raising her crowned to a crescent moon. The reader takes the personal relationship that has developed with a down-to-earth Mary back to the biblical text, and sees her newly there. In *Testament*, Mary Magdalene becomes a confidante. She takes you by

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18. Ogden Bellis, *Women in Scripture*, 29.

19. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 180.



the hand through the door that had suddenly opened to her, through the “passage . . . granted to a country you’d hoped might exist but had never quite dared to imagine” (128). Never again will Hagar be silent in her servitude. When Yahweh’s angel says to her “Go back to your mistress and submit to her,” (Genesis 16:9), Hagar will ever respond “what’s so merciful about *Him*, I’d like to know?”<sup>20</sup> *The Stone Angel* bridges the temporal gap that exists between biblical and contemporary worlds. Hagar walks among us. In Phyllis Tribble’s reading of Hagar’s story, Tribble writes that “all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, . . . the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child . . .”<sup>21</sup> In *The Stone Angel* she is an old woman taking stock of her life and the bondage she endured, and also a cogent reminder that the stories contained in biblical texts continue to be enacted. They are *our* stories.

Atwood, Laurence, Ricci and Schoemperlen play a part in the work of remembering biblical women and themes insofar as they help enliven them and bring them into readers’ homes and lives. With “strategies that look not *at* women in texts but at the world *through their eyes*, [they] are erasing the erasure of the memory of women’s lives in the Spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Reading the novels addressed here beside their biblical counterparts encourages the reader to return to the biblical texts with fresh eyes, but also inevitably, if subtly, alters the reader’s understanding of the very meaning of the biblical texts. In effect, a kind of inverse palimpsest is created. It is not that the older biblical text has been erased and overlaid with contemporary texts, but that the ancient text is read *through* the translucent pages of the contemporary works. Inscribed overtop of the words of the Torah or the Gospels, quite invisible to the eye, are images from *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *The Stone Angel*, *Testament* and *Our Lady of the Lost and Found*. Mary in Nikes floats close to the surface of consciousness when one reads of Mary trying to collect her son in Mark’s Gospel, and a sympathy is evoked. While reading of Rachel

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20. Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964), 120. Emphasis mine.

21. Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 28.

22. Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 30–31.

giving her maid Bilhah over to her husband Jacob so that she might have a child through her (Genesis 30:1–6), the reader feels Offred's reaction to the monthly ceremony in which the Commander attempts to impregnate her. Hagar and Mary Magdalene are similarly touched and transformed by means of the transformations that have occurred in readers who engaged with, even loved, the characters on the pages of these particular contemporary novels and a host of others like them.

"A useful step in biblical scholarship has been recognizing that meaning is based on the possibilities the text offers as well as factors affecting the reader."<sup>23</sup> We bring our histories, our social locations, *ourselves* to the reading of any text, and those selves now include the memory of Hagar Shipley, Miryam of Magdala, Offred and Mother Mary in her blue trenchcoat. In this valiant company we see newly and inquire differently into biblical texts.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, which ends at an academic conference well after the events of the central narrative, an academic commenting on Offred's memoirs and unknown fate says this: "As all historians know, the past is a great darkness" (323). My counterpoint: As all lovers of literature know, the past is an open book, illuminated by the searching light of engaged imaginations. "Sometimes we have no alternative but to make up a history or remain bereft."<sup>24</sup>

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23. Jane Richardson Jensen, "Old Testament Women: An Overview," in *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, 164.

24. Metzger, *Writing for Your Life*, 69.