

# THE HEBREW BIBLE & THE OLD TESTAMENT IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

BY JESSICA TEISCH

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” After the first verse of Genesis from the Bible, works from John Milton’s 17th-century epic poem *Paradise Lost* to Anita Diamant’s late 20th-century novel *The Red Tent* interpreted, reimagined, and molded that opening verse of the Hebrew Bible and the words that followed.

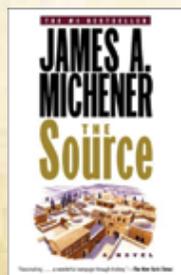
Below, we present contemporary novels inspired by figures and events in the Hebrew Bible, a collection of canonical Jewish writings by the ancient Israelites. The Hebrew Bible is also known as the Old Testament, despite some variations in chapter order, translation, and interpretation between Jewish and Christian sources. In our list of books, we’ve removed some of the nuances of this distinction; for example, we’ve included some works inspired by other books in the Jewish canon and a few others drawn from Mormon theology; some are Jewish in focus, while others are Christian. So we use the terms interchangeably. But the general characters and events remain the same, even if interpretations differ. We’ve also shied away from inspirational, religious books, focusing more on popular historical fiction.

The novels below are by no means representative of the colorful characters found in the Bible. They offer, however, a starting place for readers intrigued by struggles of love, war, family, faith, loss of faith, and the evolution of civilization—themes that remain as timeless as the Bible itself.

## WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

### **The Source** (1965)

By James A. Michener



In 1963, three archaeologists at a dig at Makor (inspired by Tel Megiddo, a site north of Jerusalem mentioned by almost every great power in the ancient Near East from biblical times to the modern era), uncover successive layers of human settlements. As they do so, Michener journeys back thousands of years to chart the history of the Jewish people, from premonotheistic days to the birth of the modern State of

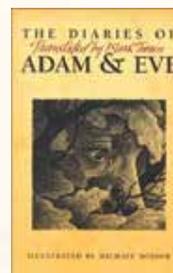
Israel. At more than 1,000 pages, *The Source* is a commitment, but there are few more engrossing storytellers to guide the way through biblical history than Michener. He draws on the personal (and fictitious) stories of a single family and its many gods, as well as their journeys of love, war, faith and loss of faith. *The Source*, which alternates between stories about each historical layer at Makor and the 20th-century dig, offers a grand overview of the region, including the evolution of religion and civilization.

## REIMAGINING THE MAJOR (AND MINOR) BIBLICAL PLAYERS

### ADAM AND EVE

#### **The Diaries of Adam & Eve** (1905; 2002)

By Mark Twain, edited by Don Roberts



This slim book isn’t “contemporary,” but we can’t help including it since the tales in this edited collection are as witty, insightful, and loving today as they were 100 years ago. Twain’s version of the story of Adam and Eve, from Genesis, first appeared in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*; these “diaries” feature a wholly realized female character in Eve, a thinker, a lover, and an emotionally available partner. While Eve works to name her new world, however, the more reclusive Adam lounges around and complains. “If she could quiet down and keep still a couple of minutes at a time, it would be a reposeful spectacle,” he says. “In that case I think I could enjoy looking at her; indeed I am sure I could, for I am coming to realize that she is a quite remarkably comely creature.” Twain aptly explores the first battle of the sexes and captures the couple’s naïveté and wonder at creation. As for the Fall? Well, stuff happens.

## Havah

**The Story of Eve (2008)**

By Tosca Lee

◆ FOREWORD MAGAZINE BOOK OF THE YEAR



Lee, who has written supernatural thrillers and historical novels about biblical figures, fills in some fascinating details of the story of Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden from the female perspective. Havah, Adam's chosen name for Eve, narrates her life from the moment of her creation to the Fall and 900 years after. The first part of the book explores the rapturous life in the garden, but then it turns to Havah's sin and its repercussions: she raises dysfunctional children, and one son kills another. Lee portrays Havah as a flesh-and-blood woman struggling to recover her former joyful existence and fighting for survival after being cast from the garden. A beautifully written rendition about the nature of humankind's relationship to God.

### Further Reading

**EVE: A NOVEL OF THE FIRST WOMAN (2009)** | ELISSA ELLIOTT

## CAIN AND ABEL

**Fallen (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2006)**

By David Maine



The story of Cain and Abel stands as the canonical tale of fratricidal rivalry. Maine renders it in flashback, beginning with an old, haunted Cain and following the Genesis story in retrospect: murder, Cain's offering spurned by God, and Adam and Eve on the other side of Eden. Somewhere in the middle, humanity at its birth turns out to be a relatively feisty, dysfunctional family, replete with a forlorn, henpecked husband and irreverent, bickering teenaged sons. "Why would God create a perfect place and then allow the Devil in it, just to trick you?" demands Cain of his father. Extracting a surprising, personal familiarity from the drama of the Old Testament, Maine conveys the regret, confusion, and pain of paradise lost with reverence and irony.

**Cain (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2012)**

By José Saramago



Renowned Portuguese novelist and Nobel laureate José Saramago is best known for his experimental fiction; *Cain*, a satirical retelling of the famed Genesis story, was his final novel. The son of Adam and Eve, Cain becomes jealous when his brother Abel's offering of meat pleases God while his own gift of vegetables is rejected. In a fit of anger, Cain kills Abel, and God dooms him to roam the earth as an outcast. Unexpectedly, however, Cain argues with God, claiming that he is partially responsible for Abel's death because he did not prevent it. God, unused to being challenged, agrees with Cain but cannot rescind his sentence. Cain is soon wandering through the tales of the Old Testament, squabbling with God and serving as an outspoken witness to his brutality and ineptitude. A bold, imaginative, and sacrilegious rendition of a familiar Bible story.

## NOAH'S ARK

**The Preservationist (2004)**

By David Maine

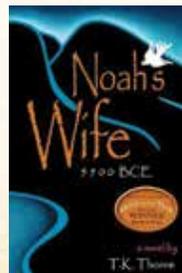


Exploring what it was like to be there "when the rain began to fall," Maine's debut novel tells the Genesis story of Noe (Noah), his wife, and his three sons and their wives. Instead of a work exploring religious faith, *The Preservationist* is a compelling, practical account of the biblical story of the flood: how will Noe and his family construct a large ark in the middle of the desert, round up two of every animal on earth, care for them once the rain begins, and remain human themselves? The rich, honest voices alternate between characters to tell a story whose broad outlines we all know; Maine fills in the details as he chronicles the characters' strengths and faults and the trials they experience while witnessing God's quiet miracle. Maine also provides the female perspective, all too often missing in the Old Testament.

## Noah's Wife

**5500 BCE (2009)**

By T. K. Thorne



As we just noted, rarely do we hear a woman's voice in the Old Testament; here, Noah and the flood come alive from the boat maker's wife's perspective. In ancient Turkey in 5500 BCE, Na'amah, a woman scarcely mentioned in the Bible, would rather tend sheep with her friend than engage in the female duties required by her husband Noah.

She suffers from a form of autism, but that doesn't prevent her from trying to act on her desires, dealing with her brother's hatred, coming to terms with her special talents, and attempting to avert global catastrophe. Beautifully researched and imagined, *Noah's Wife* casts Na'amah as an endearing character as she struggles with the era's changing religious beliefs—from the Mother-Goddess to a more patriarchal Father-God system.

### Further Reading

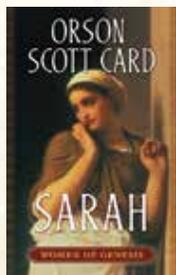
**NOAH PRIMEVAL** (Chronicles of the Nephilim, Book 1) (2011) | BRIAN GODAWA

## THE PATRIARCHS, MATRIARCHS, AND THEIR NEAR DESCENDANTS

### Sarah

**Women of Genesis, Book One** (2000)

By Orson Scott Card



It might seem odd that the author of the science fiction classic *Ender's Game* would take on a Bible story, but Card—a practicing Mormon—has embraced various genres. In this feminist take on the biblical patriarchs' story, he paints a portrait of Abraham's wife Sarah, who starts life as a princess in Mesopotamia. Told through her perspective and that of her blind sister Qira, the novel follows Sarah as she struggles to have faith in God and conceive a child. Rich in emotions, motives, and relationships rather than historical or, for that matter, the biblical record, Card reinterprets Sarah's life amid the splendor of Egypt and the barren Sinai desert. Though he sprinkles Mormon references to LDS theology throughout the novel, that doesn't detract from the story's lasting power. The Women of Genesis Series continues with *Rebekah* (2001) and *Rachel and Leah* (2004).

### The Son of Laughter (1993)

By Frederick Buechner

♦ CRITICS' CHOICE BOOKS AWARD

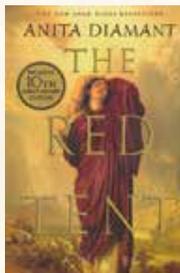


In this fictionalization of the Genesis story of Jacob, the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham, all of the main characters and events of the patriarch's life are present: the moment Jacob convinces his twin brother, Esau, to sell his birthright and tricks his father into giving him the blessing meant for Esau; Jacob's dreams and his wrestling with God; his relationships with his two wives, Rachel and Leah; and the journeys of his son, Joseph.

With elegance and imagination, Buechner, a Presbyterian minister, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, and the author of more than 30 books, presents Jacob as a cranky, humorous man reminiscing about his life during his last days in Goshen—including the family feuds, tribal enmities, and trials that reveal our uneasy relationship to God.

### The Red Tent (1997)

By Anita Diamant



In the Old Testament, Dinah was the only surviving daughter of Jacob and Leah. Genesis 34 tells briefly of her abduction and rape by a Canaanite prince and her brothers' revenge. *The Red Tent*, a worldwide best seller, fleshes out the character of Dinah, whose voice is conspicuously absent in the original story. Diamant, the author of nonfiction books about contemporary Jewish life, uses Dinah's silence to reimagine daily life for women during this historical period. Rather than drawing out a story that centers on men's relationships to God, she focuses on the richness of women's culture and their sacred sisterhood. Removing the tale from the religious context (some critics fault Diamant for presenting Leah and Rachel, two of Jacob's wives, as polytheistic, for instance), Diamant re-creates Jacob's tent city and his family's shepherding life while exploring Dinah's personal story. A wonderful story, well-told.

### Further Reading

**JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS** (1933–1944) | THOMAS MANN

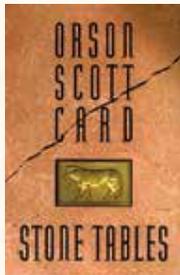
**SARAH** | MAREK HALTER (2004)

**THE RAPE OF TAMAR** (1970) | DAN JACOBSON

## MOSES

### Stone Tables (1997)

By Orson Scott Card



We have already introduced Card and his interest in religion; in *Stone Tables*, originally written as a play he wrote while on a mission for the LDS Church in Brazil, Card interprets the life of Moses from the Mormon perspective. Drawn from Exodus, this work of speculation explores the complex relationship between Moses and his brother Aaron (one defined by envy, Card posits), his sister Miriam, his mothers, his wife, and the pharaoh. In chronicling Moses's life, from his achievements as a prince of Egypt to the ten plagues, the burning bush, and the wanderings through Egypt, Card historicizes the Israelites' journey out of slavery and touches on universal themes of faith, jealousy, rebellion, and, not least, political intrigue. As with his novel *Sarah*, readers not familiar with Mormon theology might be initially thrown

off. However, his excellent characterizations, witty, insightful dialogue, and evocative window into the era may help readers overcome his speculations.

### Further Reading

**SEVEN DAYS TO THE SEA: AN EPIC NOVEL OF THE EXODUS** (2006) | REBECCA KOHN

**MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN** (1939) | ZORA NEALE HURSTON

**THIRST: THE DESERT TRILOGY** (1996) | SHULAMITH HAREVEN

**ZIPPORAH, WIFE OF MOSES** (2005; Canaan Trilogy) | MAREK HALTER

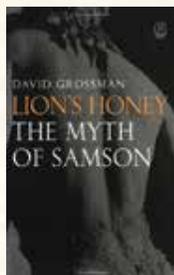
**THE MIDWIFE'S SONG: A STORY OF MOSES' BIRTH** (2000) | BRENDA RAY

## SAMSON

### Lion's Honey

**The Myth of Samson** (2006)

By David Grossman



Grossman, one of Israel's most preeminent writers, retells the biblical story of Samson from Judges. A man of supernatural strength who was born to save Israel, Samson kills a lion with his bare hands, defeats a Philistine army, and breaks free from capture. He is, however, powerless when it comes to his hair (his strength derives from his uncut locks) and women, particularly Delilah, who betrays him by cutting his hair in his sleep. Grossman reimagines the tragic events of Samson's life while empathetically casting him as "a lonely man, forever tortured, enslaved by a God who has chosen for him a demanding mission—the salvation of Israel—for which his personality and character are too weak." As for revealing his secret to Delilah? It was "with the foolish innocence of one who believes that if he were to confide everything to another person, all at once, in a kind of innocent transfusion, he would finally achieve a feeling of genuine intimacy."

### Further Reading

**THE BOOK OF SAMSON** (2006) | DAVID MAINE

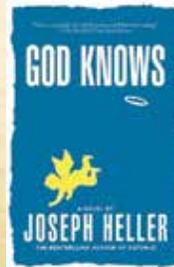
**DELILAH** (2009) | INDIA EDGHILL

## KING DAVID

### God Knows

(1984)

By Joseph Heller



Readers who venture beyond *Catch-22* will savor this tragicomic novel about King David, the revered warrior and righteous King of Israel who reigned over the land in the 10th century BCE. Sure, he was a sheep herder, a warrior, a musician, and a poet. But in Heller's retelling, he was also a scrappy, cocky child and an overbearing, unhappy Jewish father

who lost a son and suffered other injustices. *God Knows* is David's deathbed memoirs. Told in a nonlinear fashion and in the voice of a 20th-century Jewish patriarch, David sees into the future: he's aware of Shakespeare, Nietzsche, and Michelangelo's rendition of him, uncircumcised ("It may be a good piece of work, taken all in all, but it just isn't me."). Rather than a "biography" of David, Heller offers a larger, hilariously fractured view of Jewish culture, family, life, and death. David's major complaint about life? God's nonsensical autocracy. "I honestly think I've got the best story in the Bible," David boasts bitterly. "Where's the competition?"

### Further Reading

**THE KING DAVID REPORT** (1998) | STEFAN HEYM

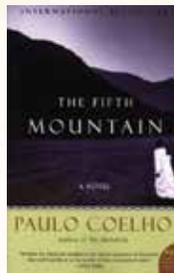
**QUEENMAKER: A NOVEL OF KING DAVID'S QUEEN** (2000) | INDIA EDGHILL

## ELIJAH

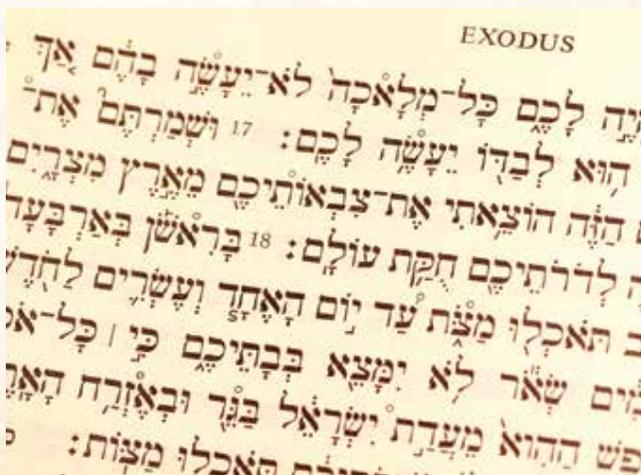
### The Fifth Mountain

(1996)

By Paul Coelho



Coelho (*The Alchemist*) relates the story of the biblical prophet Elijah from Kings. In the ninth century BCE, the 23-year-old carpenter flees Gilead after the Phoenician princess Jezebel orders the execution of all Israelite prophets who refuse to worship the pagan god Baal. Directed by an angel, Elijah finds refuge in Zarephath (Akbar), where he falls in love with a young widow, journeys up the Fifth Mountain, raises the dead, questions his relationship to God, and becomes a solid citizen—all before he is carried off to heaven in the legendary chariot of fire. In eloquent prose, Coelho presents Elijah with his traditional tests of faiths ("All life's battle teach us something, even those we lose," Elijah says) while expanding his story and contextualizing it amid war, clashing religions, plagues, and even the invention of the Byblos syllabary (the alphabet first discovered in the port of Byblos in present-day Lebanon).

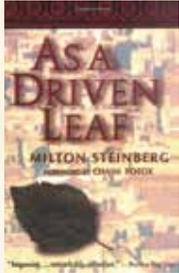


## NOVELS BASED ON TEXTS INSPIRED BY THE HEBREW BIBLE

### THE TALMUD (ORAL TORAH)

#### As a Driven Leaf (1949)

By Milton Steinberg



Steinberg, who served as the spiritual leader of New York's Park Avenue Synagogue, explores the merging of Western secular culture with the Jewish intellectual tradition in this enduring classic. *As a Driven Leaf* centers on the Talmudic figures of Elisha ben Abuyah and Rabbi Akiba in the second century CE. A Jewish scholar in Roman Palestine, Elisha suffers a crisis of faith in God after a tragedy. Excommunicated from his community, he travels to Syria and, in search of a deeper truth, begins to explore ancient Greek and Roman culture. Ultimately, he must decide whether to remain loyal to the Jews and fight domination by the Roman Empire or embrace Hellenistic society. Beautifully written and evocative of the era, this classic explores the timeless conflict between tradition and the allure of the larger surrounding culture while vividly reimagining Hellenistic culture and Israelite customs. See also *The Prophet's Wife* (2010), Steinberg's posthumous, unfinished novel set in the days before the Assyrian invasion of Israel, based on Hosea.

#### Further Reading

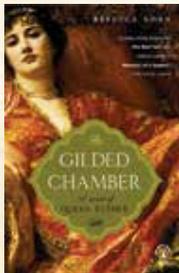
LOVE IN A BROKEN VESSEL (2013) | MESU ANDREWS

### THE BOOK OF ESTHER (KETUVIM)

#### The Gilded Chamber

A Novel of Queen Esther (2004)

By Rebecca Kohn



Kohn's debut novel follows the Esther, celebrated during the Jewish holiday of Purim. After banishing his wife Vashti, King Xerxes (519–465 BCE) hopes to find a new wife by claiming all the virgins in Persia. The beautiful Esther, a Jewish orphan and cousin of Mordechai, a Jew who attends to the king but hides his heritage, is presented to the king; he makes her his queen without knowing her Jewish lineage. Enter the villain Haman, who sets out to destroy the Jews and who is an unlikely savior, and the stage is set for a fascinating tale of palace intrigue, guile, and conspiracy. Kohn carefully depicts the social customs, sexual practices, and politics of the Persian empire, while enlivening Queen Esther and the conflict between love and duty. The novel was a 2004 selection for the Barnes and Nobel Discover Great New Writers Award.

#### Further Reading

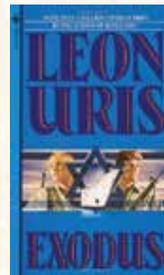
ESTHER: A STORY OF COURAGE (2003) | TRUDY J. MORGAN-COLE

HADASSAH: ONE NIGHT WITH THE KING (2005) | TOMMY TENNEY WITH MARK ANDREW OLSEN

### AND A FEW CONTEMPORARY ALLEGORICAL NOVELS

#### Exodus

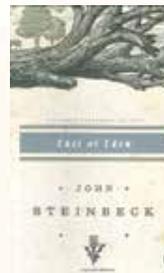
By Leon Uris (1958)



Uris (*Trinity* and *Mila 18*) uses the themes of the Exodus story (Moses, remember?) in his account of the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. A worldwide best seller, the novel opens with Ari Ben Canaan, an Israeli freedom fighter born and raised on a kibbutz, plotting to transport Jewish refugees from a British detention camp in Cyprus to Palestine. The novel then explores the lives of others involved in the building of a Jewish state under the British mandate and against all odds—including an American nurse, an American journalist, a British military officer, and a young survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto and Auschwitz—as their lives play out against one of the 20th century's greatest political struggles.

#### East of Eden (1952)

By John Steinbeck



This allegorical novel of Adam and Eve and their first two children, Cain and Abel, is at heart a story about good and evil, guilt and acceptance. Steinbeck chose the title from Genesis, Chapter 4, verse 16: "And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the Land of Nod, east of Eden." Set primarily in northern California's fertile Salinas Valley between the start of the 20th century and the end of World War I, Steinbeck's masterpiece is a work of fictional and personal history that explores the intertwined stories of two American families, the Trasks and the Hamiltons. Generation after generation, they reenact the rivalry between Cain and Abel as they grapple with questions of sacrifice and father-son relationships. As the narrator says, when looking back on their lives, people "will have left only the hard, clean questions: Was it good or was it evil? Have I done well—or ill?" Final questions for us all.

#### Further Reading

SONG OF SOLOMON (1977) | TONI MORRISON

GOAT MOUNTAIN (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2014) | DAVID VANN ■