

Reading Group Guide
AFTER ABEL AND OTHER STORIES
By Michal Lemberger

Conversation Starters

1. In the author's afterword, she says, "Long before John Milton turned the narrative of the creation and Christian fall into his sprawling epic poem *Paradise Lost*, Jewish *midrash* and *agadah* contained stories that give flesh to what are often bare-bones biblical tales." The stories of *After Abel* reimagine stories many of us think we know and the author took some liberties with the original biblical texts. What is the same? What is different?

2. The author also says, "You won't find a fictionalized version of Ruth and Naomi's story in this book. . . . I know when not to mess with perfection." What does she mean by this? And why do you think she chose to retell the stories she did?

3. Is there a biblical figure or story that you wish the author would have included?

4. Did you discover something about these stories that you never knew before because of the book's reimagined narratives?

5. What does the title story suggest about the ways a person might recall her own life story? And how does that differ from how it might be presented by others?

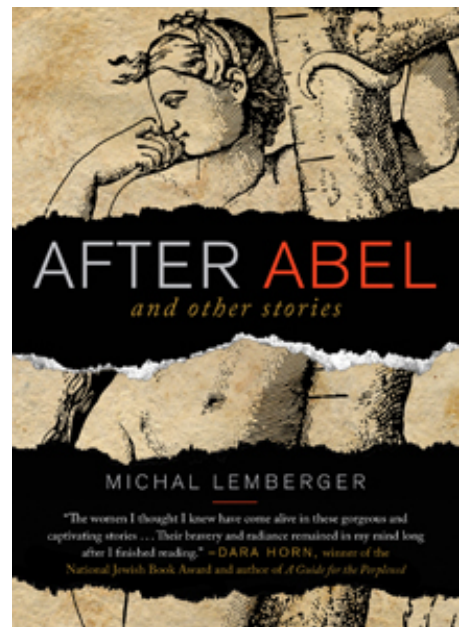
6. In the Bible, Lot really does offer his daughters to the mob outside his door. What does it say about our culture that no one has ever questioned the treatment of Lot's daughters in this story before?

7. What do you make of the fact that Achsah's story so closely resembles classic fairy tales in the way it's told?

8. What does the story "Zeresh, His Wife" say about access to power in political environments? And what does the story "City of Refuge" suggest about human urges toward peace and violence?

9. Of all the stories in the book, only "Saul's Daughter" is narrated by a man. Why do you think that is? What does it suggest about the character of Palti? Of Michel?

10. We tend to read the Bible in a vacuum of context, but the treatment of its female characters is grounded in a particular time, place, and culture. After reading all the stories in the book, do you have a new understanding of the lives of women in the Bible?



Michal Lemberger on *After Abel*

After Abel is about women in relationships. The Hebrew Bible defines women almost exclusively as daughters, wives, mothers, and very occasionally sisters. It surely speaks to the limitations of my own imagination to admit that it took becoming a wife and mother myself to be able to enter those stories in new ways, even though my marriage and the ways in which I am raising my children bear very little resemblance to those in the Bible.

I did a lot of reading as I wrote the stories for this collection. Certain novels and other types of narratives helped me find a voice or structure, or more general feeling, for the stories. The choices might surprise you. The idea for the story “Lot’s Wife” actually came to me while I was reading *The Hunger Games* on my bed one afternoon. Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* reverberated around my mind as I wrote a few of the stories. Rachel Kushner’s novel, *The Flamethrowers*, made a big impression on me. Naomi Alderman’s *The Liar’s Gospel*, about the life and death of Jesus as told by the people around him, sat next to me as I struggled through the writing of “Saul’s Daughter.” The character of Zeresh in “Zeresh, His Wife” grew out of two years of thinking about Ruth Madoff. In the end, I thought of Zeresh as starting out looking something like Lady Macbeth, pulling the strings in a bid for power, and ending up like Ruth Madoff, left on the wrong side of closed doors. (Although I think Zeresh is a lot smarter than the real Ruth Madoff.) I reread Louise Erdrich’s novel, *Love Medicine*, before writing “City of Refuge.” Behind all of that was a lifetime’s love of mythological canons, despite their often miserable attitude toward and treatment of women.

I composed these stories with relative speed, but I wouldn’t say it was an easy task. The characters at the heart of many of these stories do not have an easy time of it. Inhabiting their realities was often emotionally painful. This was especially true when I was writing from Penina’s perspective. In the book of Samuel, she is portrayed as downright nasty. The fact that she is unloved is not given as reason to pity or feel for her, but as just punishment for someone so spiteful. What is ignored is how lonely being unloved makes someone. Writing from within that loneliness made it hard for me to leave my house on some days. Outwardly, my life was full in ways a character like Penina could never know: loving husband, adored and adoring children, friends, Southern California sunshine. But within, I was consumed by her pain. Happily, I wrote Miriam’s story immediately afterward and was able to ventriloquize all my daughters’ chatty friends, whose lives are so blessedly different than that of a slave girl, but whose openness and simple acceptance of their own value was a joy to enter and write out of.

Finally, the title: When we think about the figure of Eve, images of the snake, the apple, and fig leaves spring to mind. But I, too, am a mother, and as such I know that no matter what else her life held, the loss of her son would have defined it like no other. Despite the history of theology that claims otherwise, I think women’s stories in the Bible begin right there, in the aftermath of Abel’s death. Everything comes after that.

Praise for *After Abel*

“Michal Lemberger is a wonderful writer—empathetic and heartbreaking, generous and fierce. The searing beauty of these stories is matched only by the passion and intelligence of the women who inhabit these pages. *After Abel* is a stunning book.” —**MOLLY ANTOPOL**, author of *The UnAmericans*

“Updating the midrash tradition for twenty-first-century readers, Lemberger brings Eve—and eight other biblical women—back to life in stories endowing scriptural narratives with new imaginative resonance.” —**BOOKLIST**

“What struck me most about these stories is their clear, assured confidence—as if Lemberger had pulled apart some of the lines in the old story, spied a new story tucked in there way off in a corner, shimmied in a fishhook and pulled it out.” —**AIMEE BENDER**, author of *The Color Master* and *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*

“This is a beautiful book of modern midrash—the ancient Jewish tradition of telling the stories between the Hebrew Bible’s lines. The women I thought I knew have come alive in these gorgeous and captivating stories, and they are unlike anything I expected. Their bravery and radiance remained in my mind long after I finished reading.” —**DARA HORN**, author of *A Guide for the Perplexed* and *The World to Come*

“Lemberger’s diction gives cogent voice to all her underestimated or overlooked narrators. Original and thought-provoking.” —**KIRKUS REVIEWS**

“Her knowledge of the Bible is evident and her creativity shines through as she weaves nine thoughtful and layered accounts of distant, complicated times.” —**PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**

“*After Abel* brings biblical women from the sidelines to the center of the story, in a compelling narrative reminiscent of Anita Diamant’s *The Red Tent*. These beautifully written stories feel like meeting Eve, Lot’s wife, and many other compelling characters for the first time.” —**LAUREL CORONA**, author of *The Mapmaker’s Daughter* and *The Four Seasons: A Novel of Vivaldi’s Venice*

“Lemberger’s stories are marvelous compounds of scholarship, imagination and empathy. Brought to life with rich historical detail, these biblical women, sidelined and silenced for centuries, prove to be audacious, utterly relatable, and spellbinding companions.” —**MICHELLE HUNEVEN**, author of *Off Course* and *Blame*

“A gorgeous book of inspired reimaginings, full of heartbreak and courage and piercing beauty.” —**BEN LOORY**, author of *Stories for Nighttime and Some for the Day*

“*After Abel* is a gem. For readers who enjoy the Bible as literature and compelling storytelling, Lemberger’s exploration of the biblical women who are mentioned but then left without their own narratives is welcome and deeply engaging.” —**SUSAN STRAIGHT**, author of *Between Heaven and Here* and *Highwire Moon*

“Through intuition and art, Lemberger opens our hearts to the powerful women of the Bible. They come alive in her magical prose, and their wisdom, long stifled and marginalized, echoes across the millennia to warm our hearts and to illumine our turbulent age. They teach us not only

how to survive, but how to thrive.” —**RABBI BRADLEY SHAVIT ARTSON**, Abner and Roslyn Goldstine Dean’s Chair of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University

“Lemberger, in *After Abel*, deepens our understanding of the stories we have heard many times and thought we knew. The women of the Bible come alive in all of their vulnerability and power. The stories in this book are a work of modern midrash—so necessary and so beautifully done.” —**RABBI SUSAN GOLDBERG**, Wilshire Boulevard Temple

“A great read and the perfect choice for book groups and sisterhoods of all sorts.” —**DR. ADRIANE LEVEEN**, Senior Lecturer in the Hebrew Bible at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and author of *Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers*

“Transports[s] the reader into fully realized biblical landscapes. . . . Like the classical midrashist, Lemberger elaborates the spaces between the text’s choices, and by giving fullness of life to female presences merely hinted at in the bible, she participates in the contemporary enterprise of bringing gender balance to the world of our mythic origins.” —**LORI LEFKOVITZ**, Ruderman Professor of Jewish Studies, Northeastern University

“A truly welcome addition to understanding what the Bible could mean by looking at a side of the story rarely considered: the story of women.” —**TAMMI J. SCHNEIDER**, Professor of Religion and Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at Claremont Graduate University, and author of *An Introduction to Ancient Mesopotamian Religion*

“Lemberger liberates the voices that are trapped beneath the [biblical] text . . . with artistry and erudition.” —**RABBI DAVID WOLPE**, Rabbi of Sinai Temple, Los Angeles and author of *Why Faith Matters*

“[Lemberger’s] exercise in empathy is more than a literary conceit. . . . She has given [these biblical women] a new birth as figures of flesh and blood, heart and brain.” —**JONATHAN KIRSCH**, *Jewish Journal* book editor and author of *The Harlot by the Side of the Road* (from the foreword)

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