

★ **The Scrolls of Deborah: Book 1 of the Desert Songs Trilogy****Esther Goldenberg**

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An unheralded descendant of Abraham honors the vibrant women of her tribe in *The Scrolls of Deborah*, Esther Goldenberg's quiet triumph of biblical fiction.

"Everybody has a story to tell, a song to sing, a life that makes a difference," Deborah tells Rebekah, the distant cousin she's purchased as a nursemaid for. Deborah, raised in Egypt, has firsthand experience with the forgotten women of Abraham's tribe—including Hallel, her grandmother, who lived a luxurious life in the pharaoh's palace, and who taught her to worship Yah when they met under each full moon.

Rebekah is an eager student, more sister than master. With Deborah, she breathes in the name of God, stories of Sarah and the matriarchs, and tantalizing tales from distant lands: "I told her about the cats of Egypt and the red radishes and green lettuce and the sweet, juicy melons ... at the market." They grow together, traipsing desert fields and anointing each other with oil. They mark coming-of-age milestones with delight. And when Abraham sends an envoy seeking a wife for his son, they travel together to meet him.

While the novel acknowledges hard realities, including era misogyny, slavery, the Akedah, and sexual assault, it does so in an unobtrusive way; its focus is more celebratory. While Deborah—who taught herself to read over Jacob's shoulder—charges gentle Joseph with writing her stories down, they already pulse through the women of her "quite ... remarkable tribe" by virtue of her determined repetition. They dance each month in ceremonies evoking Rosh Chodesh; they bind their family together, uplifting kindness and righteousness. Through their eyes, new depth is revealed in the patriarchs, too: Abraham has regrets; divine light shines forth from Isaac.

In the exaltant biblical novel *The Scrolls of Deborah*, it is women of Abraham's tribe who are the true storymakers.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March / April 2024)

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