

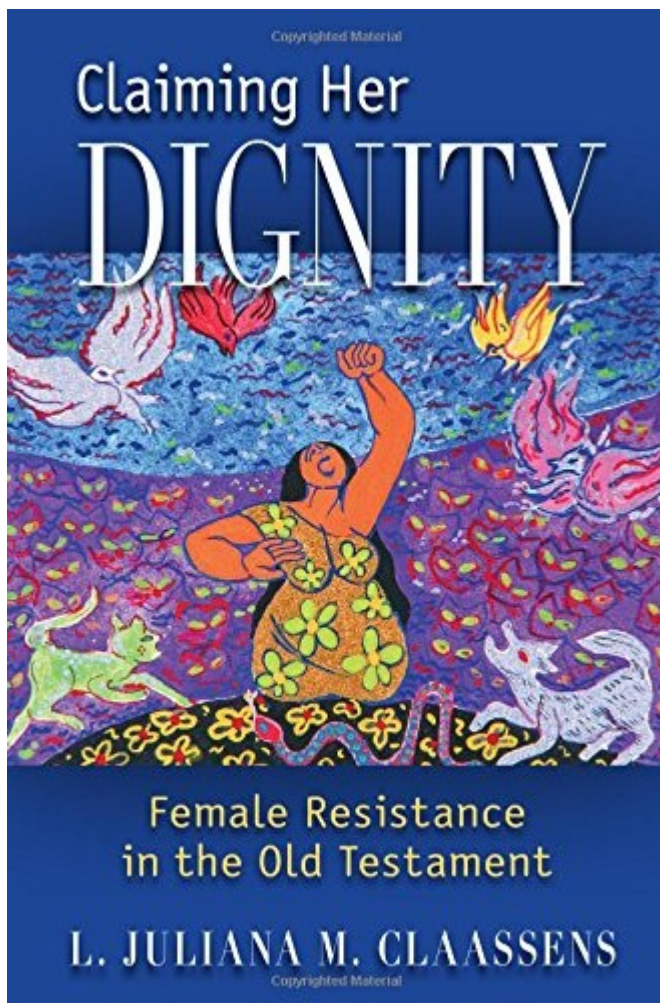
Tales of fierce women

Telling stories of resistance is itself an act of resistance.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

May 5, 2017

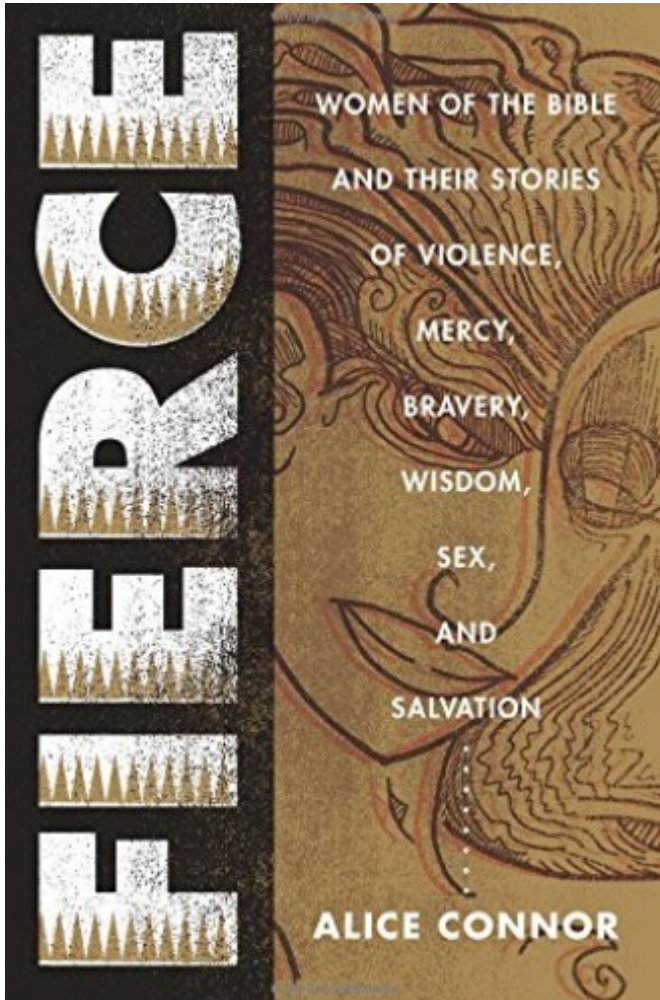
In Review



Claiming Her Dignity

Female Resistance in the Old Testament

by L. Juliana. M. Claassens
Liturgical Press



Fierce

Women of the Bible and Their Stories of Violence, Mercy, Bravery, Wisdom, Sex, and Salvation

by Alice Connor
Fortress

One of my favorite divinity school classes was “Women of the Bible,” taught by [Tikva Frymer-Kensky](#). Every minute of the lectures—during which she primarily read us chapter drafts for the [book](#) she was writing—was glorious. She was at once a scholar

and a storyteller. I thought of Tikva when I read these two books about biblical women. L. Juliana M. Claassens is a first-rate scholar, and Alice Connor is an engaging storyteller. When read together, their books create the kind of environment I encountered in that divinity school classroom: one that challenges me to take seriously the Bible's context and history of interpretation while also risking personal immersion in the stories.

Claassens's study examines four types of nonviolent resistance that are manifest in the stories of women in the Bible: resistance against war, rape, heterarchy (patriarchy viewed through an intersectional lens), and precarity (poverty viewed intersectionally). She deliberately excludes stories of violent resistance, such as Jael's assassination of Sisera, arguing that "violent resistance is not an option in the violent world in which we live, as violence quite regularly begets more violence." But there's plenty to be celebrated, and plenty more to challenge readers, in the stories of nonviolence that she includes. Claassens compassionately engages the stories of biblical women—Rizpah, Tamar, Hagar, and many others—with diverse conversation partners, from Martha Nussbaum to Toni Morrison to Jacqueline Lapsley to Judith Butler to Dora Rudo Mbuwayesango. My beloved Tikva Frymer-Kensky even appears in these pages.

This book is scholarly in method and tone, but it isn't without its storytelling moments, many of which are grounded in Claassens's experiences as a white woman in South Africa. She notes that "in South Africa today, one finds the great folly of a widespread myth that having sex with a virgin daughter may cure one from HIV and AIDS," a phenomenon that she views through the story of the daughter of Jephthah. Negotiating deftly between the views of Delores Williams and Renee Harrison, Claassens ponders the usefulness of comparing Hagar's experience with the experiences of black women today:

We find Hagar in the wilderness: objectified, expelled, powerless, exposed, afraid, homeless, hungry, and thirsty; a victim of economic and sexual exploitation; an object of scorn and disgust. Her story is reminiscent of so many other women today who find themselves in an impossible situation . . . To notice acts of resistance in Hagar's story is important for contemplating the various ways in which women claim their dignity in the face of the ugliness of poverty and deprivation.

In the end, Claassens explains, telling stories of women's acts of resistance is itself an act of resistance. It's rooted in hope, and it engenders hope. But there is no rosy-eyed conclusion here: "Resistance is often just flickerings. Eruptions. Moments. Quite often one finds that the status quo returns with a vengeance and with a renewed fierceness."

Connor, an Episcopal priest and college chaplain, matches the fierceness of patriarchy with a sassy ferocity of her own. *Fierce* reads like a series of edgy homilies that are at once hilarious and horrifying in their retellings of biblical stories of violence against (and occasionally by) women. Connor doesn't try to clean up the stories' messiness. As she puts it on her [website](#), "Here's the thing: the Bible is R-rated." Everything is on the table in this book: sexual desire, swearing, addiction, erasure, death. But there's also reclaimed agency, trickery that undermines power, mercy, and a God who sees and hears us. As Connor says, "Put that in a knitting pattern."

While much of the prose is lighthearted, Connor grapples seriously with some of the most unpalatable stories in the Bible. One particularly painful chapter retells [Ezekiel 23:28-30](#) in contemporary language from the perspective of God, the cosmic abusive spouse: "The crowd beat her with stones and cut her with swords, and God egged them all on. Then and only then did God's anger dissipate. There's a little denouement where God said, 'look, I'm sorry I had to be like that, but you totally deserved it, bitch.'" Connor continues, "I am straight up furious about these two chapters." But, she explains, "Ezekiel is performing for us," trying to shake us out of our idolatry, our numbness to violence, our outrage fatigue. And, she admits, "I want a God who gets angry—not irrationally angry, not abusive or vengeful, but still angry at suffering and injustice." She concludes that Ezekiel's prose tells us about us as much as it tells us about God. "We shame women for their sexual desire; we abandon each other in time of need; . . . we attack and destroy."

This kind of honesty is compelling. It's transformative. It's fierce.