

# MIRIAM FEINBERG VAMOSH ON HOLY GROUND

by Susan Reichert



What would it be like for an author to live in and breathe the air of a country that dates back to biblical times, and write a novel built on both historical and archaeological sources?

Miriam Feinberg Vamosh might tell you it is exhilarating and humbling. Having moved to Israel in 1970, she lives in the Mountains of Judah west of Jerusalem, a stone's throw from Emmaus, Gibeon and other inspiring biblical sites.

Along with nonfiction books on the region, Miriam is the author of *The Scroll*. Her 2013 novel was developed over a period of years, and based on an actual archaeological find, a divorce document issued at a place called Masada, for a woman also named Miriam. Vamosh weaves a story spanning three generations. On Masada's final horrific day, the characters must make choices none of us would want to make.

"The first 'building block' is the story of Masada, the palace-fortress of Herod the Great, which the ancient historian Josephus tells us was taken over by Jewish rebels and became the last place they faced off against the Roman army. Josephus says the rebels took their own lives rather than fall into the hands of the Romans—except for two women and five children.

"By the way, here's an unusual conundrum for a writer of historical fiction: I had to give that heroine the same name as mine—Miriam. Why? Because the key to my plot is that the woman in the real divorce document, whose name is actually given as Miriam (the most common woman's name of the period), in my book was the survivor of Masada. I emailed Ada Yardeni, a scholar specializing in names of that period, to see if by chance there were a nickname for Miriam that I could use. She quickly informed me I would not be able to use a nickname. So Miriam she remains."

Vamosh, who has her Master's degree in Archaeology and Heritage, is an ITA recognized translator as well

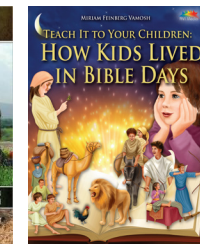
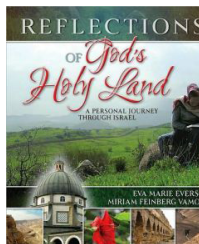
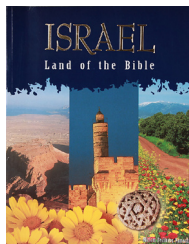
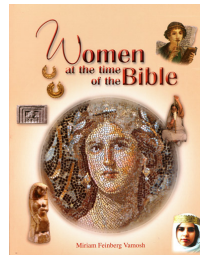
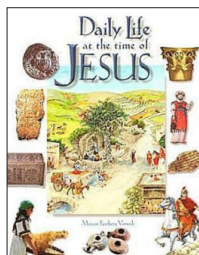
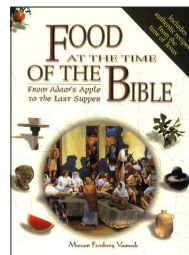
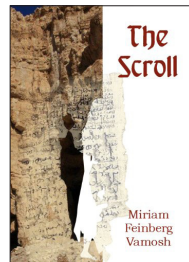
as a tour educator who has studied the period. She is able to show people sites in Israel like Masada, Jerusalem and Caesarea. She had the foundational background she needed to write this book. However, like most historical novelists, she knew she would need more research.

"When the idea occurred to me about the woman survivor of Masada, the first thing I did was to phone Magen Broshi, then-curator of the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, where the Dead Sea Scrolls and Bar Kokhba letters are on display. I asked him whether my scenario could have happened. His answer—in typically brusque Israeli style—gave me the green light: 'You can say whatever you want about her. We have no idea what happened to her.'"

Miriam's research then moved into reading more on the period and its archaeological remains, spending long hours in the library. "This was in about 1996 B.G. No, that's not a typo—it stands for 'Before Google.' It also helped, around that same time, I was asked to write my first book on everyday life in this very period—*Daily Life at the Time of Jesus*. The publisher of that book, Palphot, put me in touch with an expert as a scientific adviser, the late Prof. Yizhar Hirschfeld, and

we had 20 hours or so of meetings from which I always departed with a stack of books from his own library and dozens of pages of notes.

"Part of my research for my novel also involved cold-calling various experts; this is something I encourage historical novelists to do. No matter how prominent the expert or the scholar, you might be surprised at how generous he or she is in sharing their knowledge. I find that the experts love talking about their field, perhaps especially when a layperson takes an interest. After my first draft and before language editing, I also asked a Ph.D. student in the field to read and critique it, which resulted



in several corrections.”

*The Scroll* was Miriam’s pet project, which meant she could take the time needed. “Long after I thought I was finished, my older daughter and most stern and faithful critic, Maya, pointed out the ending was too sad for readers. ‘People need hope,’ she admonished me. I told her the [real life] ending *was* sad. I referred to the finding of the bones of people from Ein Gedi by the archaeologist Yigal Yadin, who determined the people had been starved to death by the Romans, which I fictionalize in the book.

“However, Maya persisted: ‘You don’t know that all of them died. Maybe someone got away.’ I couldn’t picture that during that time. I was also very much under the cloud of events in Israel, including the assassination of our prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin, by an extremist.

“Then a year before publication, my first granddaughter was born—and I saw the world through new eyes. Possibilities for a better future emerged for my heroine and her descendants, and I changed the ending.”

Another landmark in Vamosh’s writing was a book written together with well-known Southern writer, Eva Marie Everson—the award-winning *Reflections of God’s Holy Land: a Personal Journey Through Israel*, a unique, cross-cultural, interfaith collaboration based on mutual love for the Bible and Israel.

Once in a while, an author is fortunate enough to be planted in the very place they need to be. ■