

WOMEN PROPHETS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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## I. Introduction

Abraham Heschel's masterpiece, *The Prophets*, inspires a sense of holy envy in those who seek an intimate relationship with God. If the prophets themselves do not stir such an emotion, Heschel's brilliant insight into their hearts and minds surely will. But for women, the sense of envy may be heightened by the fact that the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures form a category that largely excludes women. The aim of this paper is to study the female prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Until recently, prophetesses in ancient Israel received little scholarly attention.<sup>1</sup> A close examination of the biblical text, as well as the story behind the text, may help modern readers, who stand in front of the text,<sup>2</sup> better appreciate the phenomenon. We will begin by defining prophet and prophecy. Then, each of the female prophets named in the Hebrew Bible will be discussed, with attention paid to the ways biblical writers, redactors, and commentators have minimized their impact. Other women in the text who performed prophetic activities will be identified, and this paper will conclude with a personal reflection on female prophecy in ancient Israel.

## II. What is a Prophet and what is Prophecy?

The Hebrew word for prophet is *nābî'*, from the verb *nābā'*, "to call." A *nābî'* is one who is called by God. The feminine form of *nābî'* is *nebî'ah*, "female prophet" or "prophetess." The

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<sup>1</sup> Few book-length studies of female prophets in the Hebrew Bible exist, and feminist scholars often discuss women prophets in ancient Israel only in relation to other concerns. See Wilda Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 10, 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Uriah Kim, "Searching for Meaning," illustrated handout, *Hebrew Bible I* (Hartford: Hartford Seminary, 2013).

word for “prophets” (pl.) is *nebi’im*. Hebrew is a gendered language; thus, in a mixed group where as few as one male prophet is present, the grammatical rule demands that the plural noun be masculine. This makes it difficult to identify all of the female prophets in the Scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

The formulaic phrase, “Thus says YHWH,” identifies the prophets as men and women who had access to God. This phrase originated in the royal court, but not all prophecy involved oracles delivered to kings. Prophecy had many manifestations<sup>4</sup> and modern scholars persist in probing its meaning. Brad Kelle defines prophecy as “a form of intermediation between the divine and human.”<sup>5</sup> Heschel sees prophecy as the “exegesis of existence from a divine perspective,” and his book focuses on the classical prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E.,<sup>6</sup> but according to Joseph Blenkinsopp, the classical prophets represent “only a small and ... anomalous minority” of all the prophets in ancient Israel.<sup>7</sup> A broad range of professional religious intermediaries were engaged in a wide variety of prophetic activities: intercessory prayer (Jer 42:4); dancing, drumming, singing (1 Chr 25:1-3); interpreting laws (2 Kgs 22:15-

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<sup>3</sup> Claude Mariottini, “Women Prophets in the Hebrew Bible,” *The Claude Mariottini Blog*, August, 2013, <http://claudemariottini.com/2013/08/19/women-prophets-in-the-hebrew-bible/>, (accessed March 13, 2015). *Nābī’* is the term used most often in the Hebrew Bible to designate a “prophet.” However, several other terms are used synonymously to describe those who perform prophetic functions. *’Īš ’elohim*, or “man of God,” applied to men such as Elijah, but there is no corresponding title for a “woman of God” in the Hebrew Bible. Another term found in Scripture is “seer” (Hebrew *rō’eh*), one who experiences visions, but a “visionary” might also be called a *chozīm*, which like *rō’eh*, is used interchangeably with *nābī’*. *Nābī’* is a “catchall ... for all kinds of religious types.” Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 28-29; Gafney, 2, 28-31; for linguistic gender uses, see *ibid.*, 15, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Several types of “false” prophecy, including divination, sorcery, wizardry, and necromancy are denounced in Deuteronomy 18:9-14. Deuteronomy 18:20 defines and regulates prophecy by identifying the prophet as one chosen by God to speak in God’s name. To speak for any other god, or to speak one’s own words while claiming to speak for God, was forbidden. However, many proscribed prophetic activities were embedded in ancient Israelite culture and they were widely practiced. Blenkinsopp, 29-30; Gafney, 2-3, 26-28.

<sup>5</sup> Brad E. Kelle, “The Phenomenon of Israelite Prophecy in Contemporary Scholarship,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 12 (2014), <http://cbi.sagepub.com/content/12/3/275.short>, (accessed March 25, 2015), 275.

<sup>6</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xxiii, xxvii.

<sup>7</sup> Blenkinsopp, 3, 9.

17); inquiring of YHWH (Jer 37:7); delivering YHWH's oracles (Is 10:24); anointing kings (1 Kgs 1:34); resolving disputes (2 Chr 28:9-15); working wonders (1 Kgs 17); mustering troops (Jgs 4); leading battles (Jgs 5); archiving oracles in writing (2 Chr 13:22); and experiencing visions (Is 1). The writers of Scripture used the term "prophet" in a fluid way.<sup>8</sup>

Given the flexibility of the term, who then might be called a "prophet"? According to Lester Grabbe, anyone summoned by God—male or female—could prophesy. Female prophets were simply "prophets that happened to be female." In ancient Israel and throughout the ancient Near East, female prophets possessed the same gifts as their male counterparts.<sup>9</sup> Women could be prophets because, unlike priests and kings who inherited their positions, prophets were appointed by God.<sup>10</sup> The Hebrew Scriptures do not indicate that the appearance of women prophets was unusual;<sup>11</sup> however, female prophets may not have been accepted in the same way male prophets were, and their roles may have differed from those of male prophets in the cult.<sup>12</sup> How accurately does the Bible reflect the historical reality of female prophecy in ancient

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<sup>8</sup> Gafney, 1-6, 41.

<sup>9</sup> Lester L. Grabbe, "'Her Outdoors: An Anthropological Perspective on Female Prophets and Prophecy,'" in Jonathan Stökl and Corrine L. Carvalho, eds., *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 2, 24-25; Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord indeed Spoken only through Moses?: A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 324; Mariottini, "Women Prophets.

<sup>11</sup> Burns, 46; Gafney, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Stökl, introduction to *Prophets Male and Female*, 8; Blenkinsopp, 32.

Israel?<sup>13</sup> To answer this question, we must study the text closely. III. The Text and the Story behind It

In the Hebrew Bible, women prophets are mentioned in only a few texts, but Wilda Gafney points out that each text, no matter how brief, “provides some contextual information for the ... female prophets it discloses.”<sup>14</sup> The following pages will study the prophetesses and their stories.

### Miriam

In Exodus 15:20-21, Miriam the prophetess led the women in song and dance after the crossing of the Red sea. This text is associated with the *J* source, and many scholars believe it is one of the oldest examples of Israel’s literature. Although Moses’ song (Ex 15:1-18) precedes Miriam’s, the early date of verses 20-21 suggests it was Miriam, not Moses, who led the first victory celebration of the Exodus.<sup>15</sup>

Most commentators agree that Miriam was a leader in the community,<sup>16</sup> but Susan Ackerman challenges Miriam’s prophetic role: she questions the historicity of the Red sea event and asks what Miriam did to earn the label “prophet.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, Rita Burns says Miriam’s

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<sup>13</sup> Keele says that one of the most “vexing problems with the socio-historical approach is the relationship between the Hebrew Bible prophetic texts and the socio-historical realities of prophecy.” Keele, 277.

<sup>14</sup> Gafney, 19; Stökl, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Burns, 15, 40. For details on the redaction of Exodus 15, see Gafney, 185.

<sup>16</sup> Blenkinsopp, 51; Burns, 7, 121.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Ackerman, “Why Is Miriam Also Among the Prophets? (And Is Zipporah Among the Priests?),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 1 (Spring 2002), 63.

title of “prophetess” is an anachronism, noting that although Miriam was some kind of cultic leader, her role was not “clearly differentiated.”<sup>18</sup> However, Gafney maintains that musical performers such as Miriam are clearly identified as prophets elsewhere in Scripture (1 Sm 10; 1 Chr 25). Furthermore, whenever prophets are introduced in the Hebrew Bible, prophetic action usually follows; when Miriam is introduced in Exodus 15:20, her song proclaims YHWH’s victory and prophetic action is accomplished.<sup>19</sup>

In Numbers 12:1-16, Miriam and Aaron were involved in a conflict with Moses over his prophetic authority; their challenge concerned Moses’ Cushite wife. This heavily redacted text establishes Moses’ superiority, but it also affirms Miriam’s and Aaron’s roles as prophets. According to Gafney, Miriam is named first in verse 1 because she is an “authentic prophet of YHWH” while Aaron is “merely a prophet of Moses”; this reflects Miriam’s standing in the community, not a “hierarchy of guilt.”<sup>20</sup> It is often assumed that the wife alluded to in Numbers 12:7 is Zipporah, but Zipporah was a Midianite, not a Cushite. The woman in verse 7 may be Moses’ second (but not polygamous) wife.<sup>21</sup> Gafney suspects Moses divorced Zipporah, prompting Miriam to challenge his qualifications as prophet and leader.<sup>22</sup> Verses 10 and 11

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<sup>18</sup> Burns, 7, 122.

<sup>19</sup> Gafney, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 81-83; Baruch A. Levine, *The Anchor Bible: Numbers 1-20* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 328.

<sup>22</sup> Exodus 18:2 indicates that Moses sent Zipporah away. The Hebrew word here is *shillucheyha*, which means “dowry” or “parting gift. It may mean that Moses dismissed Zipporah and returned the dowry—that is, he divorced her. In Exodus 18:3-7, Jethro tried to return Zipporah to Moses, but the text does not say that Moses took her back. Moses seemed to ignore Zipporah and their children while he welcomed Jethro into his tent. Zipporah is not mentioned again after Exodus 18:6. Gafney, 81-82; Levine, 328.

suggest a priestly attempt to place all of the blame for the conflict on Miriam while preserving the “cultic purity” of Aaron.<sup>23</sup>

Ackerman regards Miriam as a “secondary character” in the Exodus saga,<sup>24</sup> but Carol Meyers argues that Miriam was a woman whose “leadership and prophetic status stand on their own.”<sup>25</sup> Gafney adds that Miriam was so admired by her people, they refused to leave Hazeroth without her (Nm 12:15). The account of Miriam’s death in Numbers 20:1 confirms her identity as a prophet—all three prophets of the Exodus died in the wilderness.<sup>26</sup> Micah 6:4 remembers Miriam as one of God’s chosen leaders in the Exodus.

### Deborah

Debate over Deborah’s role begins when her name first appears in Judges 4:4: Deborah means “bee,” but one medieval commentator calls her a “hornet.”<sup>27</sup> Others say her name is an anagram of the Hebrew *dibberah*, “she spoke.”<sup>28</sup> Deborah is the woman of Lapidoth, often

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<sup>23</sup> Gafney believes that both Miriam and Aaron were punished with a skin disease. “In verse 10,” she notes, “the disease is imposed twice: the first time, Miriam is diseased, and the second time ... Aaron was diseased.” Gafney translates verse 10 as follows: “And the cloud turned away from the tent, and then and there, Miriam was diseased like snow! And Aaron turned toward Miriam and then and there, diseased skin!” In verse 11, “Aaron examines himself and finds certainly guilt, and possibly the disease,” Gafney concludes, 83-85.

<sup>24</sup> Ackerman, 71.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Meyers, gen. ed., Toni Craven and Ross Kramer, assoc. eds., *Women in Scripture: a Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Burns, 121; Gafney, 85.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Herzberg, “Deborah and Moses,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38 (2013), doi: 10.1177/0309089213492816, (accessed January 31, 2015), 30; Jack M. Sasson, *The Yale Anchor Bible: Judges 1-12* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 254.

<sup>28</sup> The name “she spoke” reinforces Deborah’s identity as one who spoke for YHWH. Gafney, 90; Frymer-Kensky, 51.

translated, “wife of Lapidoth.” Lapidoth means “torch,” and some commentators believe Lapidoth and Barak (which means “fire”) are the same person.<sup>29</sup> They conclude that Deborah derived her status from her relationship with Barak.<sup>30</sup> But if “Lapidoth” is a proper name, it appears nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible. “Woman of Lapidoth” is more likely a descriptor meaning “woman of torches” or “fiery woman.”<sup>31</sup>

Deborah was a prophet of YHWH. She “received and passed on prophetic messages concerned with military activity ... accompanied the tribal levy into battle,” and celebrated the victory with song, Blenkinsopp explains.<sup>32</sup> In Judges 4:7, the statement of the Lord’s intent was made in the first person because it was YHWH who was speaking, not Deborah. The words “I will give [the enemy] into your hand” were the characteristic expression used by prophets before battle; it was the prophet’s role to verify a battle was truly a holy war of God (1 Kgs 20:13; 22:6).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Leah Kohn, “Deborah as Prophetess, Judge, and Mother: A Woman’s Innate Ability to Inspire,” *Women in Judaism*, 2002, *Torah.org*, 1995-2007, <http://www.torah.org/learning/women/class62.html>, (accessed February 11, 2015); Sasson, 257.

<sup>30</sup> JoAnn Hackett successfully refutes the notion that Barak was the “real judge” in the story. JoAnn Hackett, “In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel,” in Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan, and Margaret Ruth Miles, eds., *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Imagery and Social Reality*, (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 27; Sasson, 257.

<sup>31</sup> Cathy Skidmore-Hess and Daniel Skidmore-Hess, “Dousing the Fiery Woman: The Diminishing of the Prophetess Deborah,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 31, no. 1 (Fall 2012), <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.uconn.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=6&sid=f80517c6-589a-4141-b8fe-cee31842c2df%40sessionmgr115&hid=126&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtG12ZQ%3d%3d#db=rlh&AN=92723008>, (accessed February 2, 2015), 3; Frymer-Kensky, 46; Gafney 8, 90; Sasson, 256.

<sup>32</sup> Blenkinsopp, 51; Frymer-Kensky, 48. Deborah gave YHWH’s command to Barak and she predicted military success (Jdg 4:6-7); when Barak refused to go without Deborah, she gave a second predictive oracle (v. 9); her third oracle (v. 14) summoned Barak to battle at the appointed time. Gafney, 91.

<sup>33</sup> Ackerman, 62; Burns, 42-43; Herzberg, 19.



Ackerman questions whether Deborah ever existed,<sup>34</sup> and Daniel Block says it was a vacuum in moral leadership that allowed a woman and several men of questionable reputation to become leaders at that time.<sup>35</sup> To the Deuteronomist redactors, Deborah represents a “temporary renewal within a broader decline”; what the country needed was a king. However, Deborah’s story predates the monarchy and it reflects an early established tradition of female leadership.<sup>36</sup> Deborah played a pivotal role as a prophetess in Israel’s pre-monarchal period. She was also a judge (the only judge in the Book of Judges who is depicted as acting in the role),<sup>37</sup> and she was a military strategist who told her field commander, Barak, when and where to enter the fray.<sup>38</sup> Some scholars claim Deborah was a warrior who led the chief warriors of Issachar while Barak led the troops (Jgs 5:15).<sup>39</sup> And Deborah was a “mother in Israel” (5:7), which, like the title “father,” designates leadership in the prophetic tradition (1 Sm 10:12; 2 Kgs 2:12).<sup>40</sup> However,

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<sup>34</sup> Ackerman, 59-62.

<sup>35</sup> Block quoted in Skidmore-Hess, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Skidmore-Hess, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Herzberg, 18. Hackett says the phrase “judging Israel” (4:4) means Deborah was the nation’s “chief executive officer,” 22.

<sup>38</sup> Mariottini, “Deborah the Prophetess,” *The Claude Mariottini Blog*, April, 2013, <http://claudemariottini.com/2009/04/17/deborah-the-prophetess/> (accessed March 15, 2015); Skidmore-Hess, 2.

<sup>39</sup> The song in Judges 5 is one of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible, and it predates Judges 4. Frymer-Kensky, 45; Gafney, 91; Skidmore-Hess, 5. Judges 5:15 depicts Deborah engaged in battle, but the narrator in Judges 4 seems to wish to separate Deborah from the frontlines. Skidmore-Hess believes the “diminishing of Deborah” begins with the redaction history of Judges 4 and 5. Skidmore-Hess, 6; Gafney, 91.

<sup>40</sup> Ackerman, 62; Hackett, 28.

Deborah was not the mother of a community of disciples; she was the mother of her people—Israel.<sup>41</sup>

### Huldah

The origin of Huldah's name is uncertain. It may come from the Hebrew *heled*, which refers to the duration of life, or from *hōled*, which means “weasel.”<sup>42</sup> Ackerman thinks Huldah's status was borrowed from her husband, who was a court official (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chr 34:22),<sup>43</sup> but Gafney argues that Huldah's husband was merely a “glorified butler.”<sup>44</sup>

Huldah's use of the formulaic phrase, “Thus says YHWH,” identifies her as a professional prophet employed by the royal court.<sup>45</sup> Two separate accounts (2 Kgs 22:8-20 and 2 Chr 34:14-28) report that Huldah was chosen by the high priest Hilkiah to interpret the meaning of the scroll found in the temple. Through YHWH, Huldah confirmed its authenticity. The text does not explain why Huldah's contemporaries (Jeremiah or Zephaniah) were not chosen,<sup>46</sup> but the narrator shows no surprise that the “prophet-in-residence” was a woman, and she was treated

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<sup>41</sup> Gafney, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Claudia V. Camp, “Huldah,” in Meyers, Craven, and Kramer, 96; Sasson, 255.

<sup>43</sup> Ackerman, 58-59.

<sup>44</sup> Gafney, 12.

<sup>45</sup> Huldah used some form of the phrase “Thus says YHWH” four times in her oracle (2 Kgs 22:15, 16, 18, 19; 2 Chr 34:23, 24, 26, 27). Burns, 45; Gafney, 100.

<sup>46</sup> Some scholars believe Jeremiah was away at Anathoth and Zephaniah was not active at the time, but Gafney says these claims are not supported in the text. Gafney, 99-100. Huldah may have been chosen because Jeremiah was critical of the government, and, unlike Huldah, he was not attached to the court. Frymer-Kensky, 325. Neiman thinks that Josiah, expecting an oracle of judgment against the monarchy, needed Huldah's “compassionate and merciful tone.” Rachel Neiman, “The Prophetess Hulda: Her Message of Hope,” *Women in Judaism*, 2002, *Torah.org*, 1995-2007, <http://www.torah.org/learning/women/class51.html> (accessed Feb. 11, 2015).

no differently from her male counterparts.<sup>47</sup> Gafney finds no gender bias on the part of Josiah or the priests, but she detects bias on the part of the writers and redactors who did not preserve the whole of Huldah's oracular legacy:

It strains credulity to believe that a temple-sanctioned court prophet uttered only one oracle or that the temple and/or royal scribes failed to record her oracles. [Huldah] is arguably the first person to grant authoritative status to the Torah scroll deposited in the temple sanctuary.<sup>48</sup>

The account in 2 Kings 22-23 implies that Josiah's reforms were a direct consequence of Huldah's oracle; however, the Chronicler's version indicates Josiah began the reforms on his own, prior to the discovery of the scroll, and this account tends to diminish Huldah's role.<sup>49</sup> While there is some doubt as to the historicity of these accounts, Blenkinsopp states their primary purpose was to establish Josiah as an "observant and zealous" follower of YHWH,<sup>50</sup> but Gafney insists the Kings account proves Huldah was equally important in establishing "the monotheistic worship of YHWH as the sole legitimate expression of ancient Israelite religion."<sup>51</sup>

#### The Prophetess (Isaiah 8:3)

Ackerman calls attention to the fact that this woman was unnamed: "the giving of names [to women] in the Bible ... is often an important maker of [their] autonomy and authority." But this "prophetess" made no oracular pronouncements; the only action attributed to her is conceiving and bearing a child, which is an ordinary event, not a prophetic act. Ackerman

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<sup>47</sup> Camp, 96; Frymer-Kensky, 234-5.

<sup>48</sup> Gafney, 102.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>50</sup> Blenkinsopp, 117.

<sup>51</sup> Gafney, 97.

contends that she was no prophetess at all, and the title “prophetess” was honorific, given to her because she was Isaiah’s wife.<sup>52</sup> There is, however, no proof “the prophetess” was Isaiah’s wife. Even if she were his wife, the wives of other prophets in Scripture (e.g., Hosea and Ezekiel) are not called “prophetess,” and other women Scripture calls “prophetess” (e.g., Miriam and Huldah) are not married to male prophets. The title “prophetess” had nothing to do with a woman’s marital status or her husband’s occupation. The unnamed prophetess in Isaiah 8:3 was clearly a member of the *nābî’* class in her own right.<sup>53</sup>

Blenkinsopp suggests the prophetess was a temple singer (which, according to Gafney, falls under the rubric of “prophet”).<sup>54</sup> Or she may have been part of the prophetic guild who preserved Isaiah’s oracles (Isa 8:16). With Isaiah, this woman sired a child and gave him a symbolic name as a sign for Ahaz.<sup>55</sup> Gafney believes “the production of a child whose name is a portent of the future of Judah is a prophetic performance” on the part of Isaiah and the unnamed prophetess.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ackerman, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Mariottini argues that the unnamed prophetess was Isaiah’s wife, but he agrees that the title “prophetess” was not derived from her relationship to Isaiah. See “Isaiah’s Wife,” *The Claude Mariottini Blog*, August, 2013, <http://claudemariottini.com/2013/08/23/isaiahs-wife/>, (accessed April 11, 2015); Burns, 43; Gafney 12; 103-5; Grabbe, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Blenkinsopp, 262; Gafney, 119-130. The unnamed prophetess in Isaiah 8:3 may be the “young woman” (*almah*) mentioned in Isaiah 7:14; the word *almah* refers to female temple musicians in Psalm 68:25. Burns, 44.

<sup>55</sup> Mariottini, “Isaiah’s Wife”; Blenkinsopp, 103; Burns, 43-44.

<sup>56</sup> Gafney, 104.

### The Daughters of Your People Who Prophecy (Ezekiel 13:17-23)

These women were members of a prophetic guild and they are generally regarded as “false” prophetesses.<sup>57</sup> Ezekiel’s criticism is set in the context of his larger complaint against all the prophets (except Ezekiel himself).<sup>58</sup> But the female prophets are accused of charm-making practices using magic and/or divination. Apparently they were quite powerful and they charged fees for their services (v. 19).

Scholars have tried to determine exactly what these women did to earn Ezekiel’s contempt. The language and imagery describing their activities is typical of Mesopotamian anti-witchcraft rituals, and at least two interpretations are possible: (1) they were primitive healthcare practitioners who used charms and incantations to protect women during childbirth and pregnancy, and through divination, they predicted whether their patients would live or die, or (2) they were necromancers. But Ezekiel’s language is not descriptive of any specific practices; it is “stereotypical,” reflecting a general, pre-exilic diversity of beliefs and practices in Yahwistic religion. Ezekiel may have opposed these women and the other prophets simply because he was intent on separating the exilic community from pre-exilic, syncretic religious practices and creating a new religious identity and a new priestly domain (Ez 34-48).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 108. Ezekiel does not call them “prophetesses” at all (13:17), perhaps because he has so much contempt for them. Mariottini, “The Nameless Prophetesses in the Book of Ezekiel,” *The Claude Mariottini Blog*, October, 2013, <http://claudemariottini.com/2013/10/07/the-nameless-prophetesses-in-the-book-of-ezekiel/>, accessed April 1, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Gafney, 108.

<sup>59</sup> Nancy R. Bowen, “The Daughters of Your People: Female Prophets in Ezekiel 13:17-23,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118, no. 3 (Fall 1999), <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.hartsem.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=4&sid=8822101c-a70a-4391-b630->

## No'adiah

No'adiah was the leader of a prophetic guild who opposed Nehemiah (Neh 6:14).<sup>60</sup> She posed a significant threat, prompting Nehemiah to pray for help. She may have been either a “true” prophet or a “false” one,<sup>61</sup> but the text gives no specific reason for Nehemiah’s hostility toward her. No'adiah may not have opposed Nehemiah’s rebuilding of the wall per se, but she may have realized that a wall separating Jerusalem from its neighbors would encourage the dissolution of mixed marriages and the exile of foreign women and children.<sup>62</sup> This brief but important text demonstrates it was not No'adiah’s identity as a prophet that was disputed; it was the interpretation of Torah that was at stake.<sup>63</sup> No'adiah’s presence proves that female prophets were leaders who continued to have an impact on their communities in the post-exilic period.<sup>64</sup>

## Prophetesses of the Future

Joel 2:28 describes a future event in which all of Israel will receive God’s spirit: young men and young women will prophesy, elders will dream, and young people will see visions.

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[a91107e60607%40sessionmgr198&hid=122&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbG12ZSZzY29wZT1zaXR1#db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001989119](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Joel%202%3A28&version=ESV) (accessed February 2, 2015), 418-33.

<sup>60</sup> The Masoretic Text uses the feminine *nebi'ah* in reference to No'adiah; the LXX uses the Greek masculine *prophetes*. Gafney, 111. The use of the masculine in the LXX may reflect a desire on the part of the translators to deny that prophetesses had any official status during the post-exilic period. Burns, 45.

<sup>61</sup> Mariottini, “Noadiah the Prophetess” *The Claude Mariottini Blog*, September, 2013, <http://claudemariottini.com/2013/09/30/noadiah-the-prophetess/>, (accessed March 20, 2015); Gafney, 113-14; Sasson, 225.

<sup>62</sup> Gafney 9-10; 111-112; Ackerman, 56; Mariottini, “Noadiah.” Nehemiah 13:23-25 describes Nehemiah’s harsh treatment of foreigners and the Jews who married them.

<sup>63</sup> Gafney, 15-16.

<sup>64</sup> Meyers, Craven, and Kramer, 132.

Gafney regards the text as the realization of Moses' hope that all of YHWH's people—men and women, young and old—will be prophets (Nm11:29).<sup>65</sup>

### Other Women Who Prophesied

Several other women are not called “prophetesses” in the Hebrew Bible, but they performed prophetic activity. Rebekah inquired of YHWH and received a direct answer (Gn 25:21-23).<sup>66</sup> The women in Exodus 38:8 who “served” or “assembled” at the door of the tabernacle may have been prophet-warriors who guarded the sanctuary.<sup>67</sup> In Joshua 2:9-11, Rahab delivered a prophetic oracle predicting Israel's victory.<sup>68</sup> Samson's mother (known only as the wife of Manoah, Judges 13:1-23) received a divine message concerning her pregnancy; she alone (not her husband) was able to interpret it.<sup>69</sup> In 1 Samuel 25:28-31, Abigail correctly predicted David's destiny in a three-fold prophecy that was later repeated by Nathan (2 Sm 7:8, 9, 16).<sup>70</sup> The Queen Mother of Lemuel performed the characteristic prophetic act of oracular proclamation (Prv 31:1-31).<sup>71</sup> Countless Israelite women were members of mixed-gender and all-female prophetic musical and funerary guilds.<sup>72</sup> In numerous texts such as Hosea 6:5, the use of

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<sup>65</sup> Gafney, 110-11; Burns, 45.

<sup>66</sup> Gafney, 35, 152-53.

<sup>67</sup> The verb *tsaba* in Exodus 38:8 is normally translated “to wage war,” but here it is translated “to serve” or “assemble,” perhaps in an effort to minimize the women's role. The word is treated as though it has a “second semantic range that only applies to the feminine gender,” Gafney observes, 155. She believes the translation of *tsaba* in this text indicates gender bias. Gafney, 153-56.

<sup>68</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 298.

<sup>69</sup> Hackett, 29.

<sup>70</sup> Frymer-Kensky, 320-23.

<sup>71</sup> Gafney, 158.

<sup>72</sup> For details on prophetic guilds, see Gafney, 119-130.

the masculine plural (*nebi'im*), when referring to all the previous prophets YHWH sent, includes women prophets such as Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah; these texts should read, “I have spoken by the male *and female* prophets.”<sup>73</sup>

### Summary

Does the Hebrew Bible accurately reflect the historical reality of female prophecy in ancient Israel? Probably not, but it reflects the reality of a stratified patriarchal society in which a male elite virtually monopolized religious and political power. The androcentric focus of the texts has fostered a tradition of interpretation that centers on male prophets and obscures the role of female prophets, and this tradition has survived in the West for centuries.<sup>74</sup> Recently, scholars such as Block, who says Deborah was not a “real” deliverer,<sup>75</sup> and Ackerman, who believes women prophets were “anomalies,”<sup>76</sup> continue to question the impact of the prophetesses, or they dismiss them completely.

### IV. The Story in Front of the Text

Christian women and men who see the Bible as a “mirror” that holds meaning for them today are unlikely to see themselves reflected in the brief accounts of the female prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures. Pastors rarely if ever preach on the subject; Sunday Schools do not teach it.

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<sup>73</sup> There are 153 occurrences of *nebi'im* in the Hebrew Bible. But “the gendered grammar of Biblical Hebrew, in which ninety-nine women prophets with one male prophet in their midst must be designated by the masculine plural, may obscure the presence of an untold number of women-prophets,” Gafney writes, 164. Unless the narrator specifies that a group of prophets consists solely of men, it may and probably does include women. *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>74</sup> Gafney, 2, 6, 11, 164; Hackett, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Block quoted in Herzberg, 30.

<sup>76</sup> Ackerman, 50-51.



But through critical study, Gafney and others have exposed the bias behind the biblical accounts of the prophetesses and heightened awareness of bias in modern interpretation. Eventually, the importance of the female prophets in ancient Israel may be understood and accepted in academic circles and on the pastoral and personal level.

## V. Conclusion

The prophets, male and female, are so much a part of the Hebrew Scriptures that we cannot help but wonder why God chose them to speak in God's stead. Indeed, as Heschel points out, the question is not what do the prophets mean to us, but what do the prophets mean to God?<sup>77</sup> In the context of this study, the question becomes why God called certain women in specific times and places to communicate with humanity. I believe the presence of powerful figures such as Deborah proves that female prophets had a message for their times and for ours, and it needs to be heard: when female prophets speak, they speak for YHWH. Thus, YHWH's voice is both masculine and feminine. YHWH is neither male nor female; YHWH transcends gender. The nature and character of God cannot be limited to the masculine images of "father" or "male warrior" projected onto the Almighty by men who dominated religious and political life in ancient Israel. YHWH is also a "mother," and she is a "warrior," too. Denise Carmody says God is "no respecter of human judgments." "Raw, divine power" was at play in ancient Israel in God's choice of leaders to inspire.<sup>78</sup> Female prophets appear in each phase of the nation's history and their stories are recorded in each section of the canon<sup>79</sup> proving they are not aberrations.

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<sup>77</sup> Heschel, xxvii.

<sup>78</sup> Denise L. Carmody, *Biblical Woman: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts* (New York: Crossroads, 1988), 29-30

<sup>79</sup> Gafney, 15.

They are YHWH's chosen spokeswomen and divinely appointed messengers of YHWH's will.

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