



## INTRODUCTION



MORE THAN THREE THOUSAND YEARS after the prophet Miriam led the Israelites dancing and drumming across the Sea of Reeds, some Jewish and Christian communities still restrict the role of women in proclamation, leadership, and presence in the pulpit on what they call biblical and traditional grounds. However, the biblical text presents female prophets leading the people of God and proclaiming the word of God unremarkably, as part of the natural order of things.

### — THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK —

This work seeks to supplement and, in some cases, challenge the existing body of scholarship on Israelite prophecy. Through close readings of the technical vocabulary for prophecy in the biblical texts, I will first examine the broad range of professional religious intermediaries who mediate divine-human encounters. I will begin with the Masoretic Text (MT) as the dominant text tradition for the Hebrew Bible.<sup>1</sup> However, since there is significant textual plurality for the



scriptures of ancient Israel, I will also analyze the relevant passages in the Septuagint (LXX), Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), and versions of the texts found at Qumran (collectively called the Dead Sea Scrolls [DSS]), along with the Aramaic Targumim, when relevant. Next, I will consider female prophets as a special category of professional intermediary religious functionaries in ancient Israel and the ancient Near East (ANE) through historical-critical and tradition-critical readings of texts in which they appear.

Some of the questions I will consider are as follows: Who are the female prophets in ancient Israel? Which women do biblical authors and later communities in which the texts were preserved, collected, edited, and disseminated identify as prophets? What activities fall under the prophetic rubric(s) of ancient Israel? Who are (some of) the female prophets in the ANE? What activities fall under the prophetic rubric(s) of the ANE? Additionally, I will consider the natural, cultural, political, and religious stimuli that may have led individuals to seek women intermediaries on behalf of themselves or others.

This work is not without challenges, because most of the academic literature of the post-Enlightenment West presents the prophet as a religious functionary with an intermediary role that largely excludes the category “woman.” A close examination of the nature and function of ancient female and male Israelite prophets indicates that such constructions, with their appeals to the Hebrew Bible and superimposed systemic gender bias, are deeply flawed.

Because biblical scholarship has produced narrow definitions of prophecy that regularly exclude many individuals historically considered to be prophets, *prophesy* will be explored and defined in terms of prophetic practices recorded in biblical and Assyrian prophetic literature.<sup>2</sup> This focus aims to recognize all women and men the biblical text calls *prophets*.

## — WHAT MAKES A BIBLICAL PROPHET? —

The biblical text uses the terms *navi'* (male prophet) and *nevi'ah* (female prophet) to describe people who engage in a broad range of interpretive practices and inquiry techniques. Deuteronomy 18:18-19 describes prophets, as established by YHWH, to be divine spokespersons who speak in God's name. Deuteronomy 18:20 indicates the existence of prophets for other gods and proscribes this practice. This verse



also identifies prophets who say they speak for God but speak their own words, even though their prophecies may cost them their lives.

The Torah calls four named individuals *navi'nevi'ah*. God identifies Abraham as a prophet who can preserve a life through prayer in Gen 20:7. In Exod 7:1, Aaron becomes the prophet of Moses. Aaron is to repeat YHWH's words mediated through Moses; he never hears directly from YHWH. The biblical text does not refer to Moses as a prophet until Deut 34:10, where he is identified as the preeminent Israelite prophet. Although he is not named *prophet* until the end of Deuteronomy, several biblical passages present Moses as the preeminent and prototypical prophet, one who has unparalleled intimate access to YHWH—face-to-face, literally mouth-to-mouth, and as a wonder worker. Exodus 15:20-21 designates Miriam as a prophet and describes her as a singer, dancer, and percussionist. In addition to these four, Num 11:26-30 describes Eldad and Medad, who are among those wandering in the wilderness, as prophesying ecstatically. Numbers 12:6 and Deut 13:1-5 mention unnamed, unnumbered prophets.

The authors of the *Nevi'im* (Prophets) identify considerably more individuals as prophets. Deborah is called a prophet in Judg 4:4; she is also a judge and commander of a military expedition. In the Former Prophets, prophets are the religious practitioners formerly known as seers.<sup>3</sup> Also in Judg 6:8, YHWH uses an anonymous prophet to proclaim deliverance from the Midianites through a formulaic oracle. In the first book bearing his name, the prophet Samuel is characterized as particularly trustworthy, evoking the memory of Moses. His intimate experience of divine self-disclosure in 1 Samuel 3 reifies the comparison. The prophets Gad, Nathan, Jonah, Isaiah, and Huldah serve as royal advisors. Ahijah serves as a kingmaker, receives personal communication from YHWH (like Samuel and Nathan), and possibly archives his prophecies. An anonymous prophet in 1 Kings 13 deceives another religious practitioner into deviating from the divinely dictated parameters of his mission and then pronounces a lethal judgment against the equally anonymous “man of God” on behalf of YHWH. In 1 Kings 16, the prophet Jehu receives a divine disclosure in a manner similar to Moses. Elijah and Elisha are a master-disciple pair of wonder-working prophets whose saga spans 1 Kings 17—2 Kings 13. In addition to proclaiming the word of YHWH, their exploits include causing and ending drought, bringing fire from heaven, contrasting the power of YHWH with the powerlessness of Baal and Asherah, executing discredited prophets, making kings, multiplying meager food



stores, healing, preventing miscarriages, and raising the dead. Before his ascension to heaven in a chariot of fire, Elijah also designates Elisha as his prophetic successor. An anonymous prophet serves as a king-maker in the story in 1 Kgs 20:13-43; he is accompanied by another unnamed prophet who helps him act out his prophecy (20:35). The prophet Micaiah dissents from the opinion of the larger prophetic community when advising the king of Israel and is struck by an opposing prophet, Zedekiah, in 1 Kgs 22.<sup>4</sup> There are also prophetic guilds, *beney-hannevi'im*, literally “children” or “disciples of the prophets” (or more rarely *hevel nevi'im*, literally “herd” or “company of prophets”),<sup>5</sup> with an unknown number of members,<sup>6</sup> whom the biblical authors regularly characterize with ecstasy so extreme some individuals call it mantic.

The Latter Prophets contain oracles of persons the biblical text identifies as prophets in Israel and Judah; however, most individuals never identify themselves as prophets.<sup>7</sup> Rather, a narrator or editor applies that designation in the third person. First Isaiah includes prophets on a list of religious practitioners and social leaders whom YHWH will remove from Judah (Isa 3:1-5). The corpus of Isaiah refers to prophets in general but with harsh terminology.<sup>8</sup> The only individual prophet to whom Isaiah refers is the female prophet with whom he had conceived a child; she escapes his condemnation (8:3). Jeremiah also speaks disparagingly of other prophets, with the exception of himself and of those who came before him (presumably both female and male prophets).<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 26–29 consists of tirades against prophets in general; chapter 28 in its entirety is a tirade against the prophet Hananiah. The text of Jeremiah credits one prophet, Uriah ben Shemaiah, with prophesying in “words like those of Jeremiah”; it is not surprising that Jeremiah has nothing negative to say about him. In Ezek 13:15-17, YHWH appears to condemn all prophets in the book of Ezekiel, including the “daughters of the people, who prophesy”; Ezekiel himself is the notable exception. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel both deliver oracular prophecy and perform sign-action, or symbolic, prophecy. Some of the activities these prophets perform include constructing, carrying, and wearing props. Isaiah’s demonstrative prophecy includes the conception and naming of at least two children with instructive names: She’ar Yashuv (A Remnant Shall Return) and Maher Shalal Hash Baz (Quickly Ravage, Speedily Plunder).<sup>10</sup> Ezekiel lies on his side in the dirt for 390 days, eats food cooked over dung, shaves his head, weighs and burns his hair, packs a bag and digs



a hole through a wall, and does not mourn the death of his wife. In Jeremiah 13, the prophet places a worn loincloth in a rock and allows it to partially decay before using it as a sermonic object lesson.

The authors of the Book of the Twelve both praise and condemn prophets. They understand prophets to be sentinels and pair them with other religious people, lay and professional, such as Nazirites, priests, and judges. Joel 3:1 (NRSV 2:28) presents prophecy as an activity that will continue into the eschaton and be performed by women and men, elders and young people, free and enslaved persons. Amos 7:14 indicates that identity as a prophet or even association with a prophetic guild could be considered undesirable. Zechariah chapters, which scholars regularly attribute to another prophet, conveniently named the Second Zechariah, has an overwhelmingly negative perspective of the prophets as divine spokespersons whose ministry is largely past, while First Zechariah refers to the earlier prophets and their words several times. The last reference to a prophet in the Book of the Twelve is to Elijah, who is prophesied to return to Israel just before the “Day of YHWH” in Malachi 3:23 (NRSV 4:5), as the forerunner to the Messiah.

In 1 Chr 25:1-3, in the *Kethuvim* (Writings), the temple musicians who are in the guilds (or families) of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun are described as prophesying with their musical instruments. The author of 2 Chr 12:5-15 presents the prophet Shemaiah as a royal counselor. Second Chronicles 9, 12, and 13 describe Iddo the seer/prophet as recording his prophetic visions in archives. The narratives that are largely duplications of those in the Deuteronomistic History present Nathan (1 Samuel 13; 2 Samuel 7-12; 1 Kings 1; 1 Chronicles 17, 29), Gad (2 Samuel 24; 1 Chronicles 23, 29), and Huldah (2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34). Furthermore, 2 Chr 20:37 describes Eliezer, son of Dodavahu of Mareshah, as prophesying against King Jehoshaphat. Second Chronicles 25:15 designates an anonymous would-be royal advisor as a prophet. The prophet Oded negotiates the release of two hundred Judeans taken captive by the Israelites in 2 Chr 28:9-15. The prophet Jeremiah is mentioned in 2 Chr 36:12 as an advisor to King Zedekiah of Judah. Ezra 5:1 and 6:14 mention the prophets Haggai and Zechariah as the rebuilders of Jerusalem after the exile. The book of Nehemiah portrays the female prophet No'adiah as the leader of the prophetic opposition to the prophet Nehemiah (6:14). In the book of Lamentations, the prophets are blind, deceptive, and iniquitous (see 2:9, 14; 4:13). Daniel 9 presents the prophets, who spoke the oracles of YHWH, as a past phenomenon.



This brief review of the canonical treatment of prophets indicates several things. First, women engage in prophecy in all three parts of the Hebrew canon. Although oracular discourse, particularly accompanied by formulas such as “so says YHWH” and “an oracle of YHWH,” is the dominant expression of prophecy, there is a broad range of activities the prophets of Israel and Judah undertake. These activities include engaging in intercessory prayer, dancing, drumming, singing, giving and interpreting laws, delivering oracles on behalf of YHWH (sometimes in ecstasy, sometimes demonstratively), resolving disputes, working wonders, mustering troops and fighting battles, archiving their oracles in writing, and experiencing visions.

Perhaps not every action undertaken by a prophet is itself prophetic, but there is still a wide range of behavior that is expressly characterized as prophetic by the use of *n-b-’*. Examples would include the following: Miriam’s singing, dancing, and drumming, Ezekiel’s year-long sign-action prophecy while lying on the ground, Jeremiah’s soiled-loincloth-as-object-lesson, the oracles of Habakkuk and Huldah, the children conceived by Isaiah and the anonymous woman-prophet, and the mantic ecstasies of the band of prophets.

The Hebrew scriptures are the primary written source for analysis of religious practices of the ancient Israelites; however, they represent a narrow, sectarian, and androcentric perspective. Therefore, they do not accurately reflect the religious experiences of all ancient Israelite women and men throughout the millennium the Hebrew Bible encompasses. In addition, the male focus of most of the texts has led their initial and subsequent interpreters, in separate and overlapping religious and academic bodies, to produce an interpretive tradition that is dismissive of the few women whom the Hebrew Bible designates as prophets. Androcentrism, and in some cases outright misogyny, has fostered the investigation of male prophets as the primary, if not the sole, objects of study in work on biblical prophecy.<sup>11</sup>

### **Women-Prophets in Modern Scholarship**

Until the last few decades, men have carried out the vast majority of biblical scholarship and interpretation of the biblical text. This has resulted in a tendency toward androcentric, patriarchal, and misogynist translations of the biblical texts, with similar trends in scholarship about the texts and their cultural context. These biases include the hermeneutical practices applied to and extended from the text and institutions that



claim the text and its narratives as their organizing and authoritative basis. This trend has construed the prophetic vocation, in particular, as primarily masculine either by ignoring female prophets or by applying criteria that categorize female prophets as irregular, extraordinary, or misidentified. This is largely true of scholarship from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, and it continues in some form into the twenty-first century.

A notable early exception is Walther Eichrodt, who observes that the text reserves Deborah's judgments for those cases in which "the local judiciary was at a loss and where she, under the authority of a God-inspired seer, was able to give a decision."<sup>12</sup> He further finds that her title "Mother in Israel," places Deborah "on a par with the priest who is given the title *'ab*, father."<sup>13</sup> Classical scholars on the prophets such as Gerhard von Rad and Abraham Heschel do not even mention the female prophets in their seminal texts.<sup>14</sup>

Hierarchical understandings of race, class, and gender (and other constructed particularities) naturally impacted biblical studies in the twentieth century. These broader theological and ideological concerns were brought to bear on biblical discourse by both female and male African American, African diasporic, European-American, and European scholars who prioritized these intersecting realities as matrices through which the scriptures were read and interpreted. These scholars read through Jewish, Christian, and nonsectarian lenses. The bulk of this work is Western, with a significant concentration of North American scholarship. Spanish-speaking *feminista* and *mujerista* theologians developed similar interpretive paradigms for their contexts.

In addition to continuing the conversations sketched out a century earlier, twenty-first-century biblical scholarship is also characterized by a plurality of voices reexamining standardized categories and asking new questions with gender, sexuality, and women's experiences at the center. One group of conversation partners engaged in woman-focused scholarship includes the voices of feminist and womanist biblical scholars, sometimes in dialogue with scholars in the African diaspora.

Some examples of how feminists have shifted the scholarly discussion about prophetic identity include several treatments of Deborah. Denise Carmody focuses on God's rejection of patriarchy in choosing a woman to lead the nation and its armies.<sup>15</sup> Mieke Bal focuses on the use of poetry in rendering justice and celebrating military victories, the links between poetry and prophecy, the role of mothers in memory making, and the use of the spoken word to order chaos.<sup>16</sup>



Jo Ann Hackett details the ways in which interpreters of Judges have reassigned the leadership role from Deborah to Barak, regularly presuming that he is her husband, Lappidoth.<sup>17</sup> She emphasizes that the assumption that the phrase “woman of Lappidoth” from Judg 4:4 is a reference to a marriage partner (it is often translated as “wife of Lappidoth”) is a highly contested one.

While some global feminists using biblical studies to do theology have also found the Deborah narrative in Judges to be extremely productive, contemporary liberationist and womanist scholars give little attention to the prophet Deborah.<sup>18</sup> One notable exception is Maria Stewart, the first American woman abolitionist to give public lectures—and arguably a proto-feminist—who maintained that she, like the prophet Deborah, was a woman, and her God was also the God of Deborah. As such, she too was divinely commissioned to speak publicly.<sup>19</sup>

Womanism and feminism are intersecting ideological approaches that prioritize gender but differ widely on the prioritization of race and class in biblical scholarship. African American liberationist discourses share Chronology with feminism, and class and race concerns with womanism. Womanist, feminist, and liberationist scholars have regularly treated one text, Numbers 12, in which Miriam and Aaron debate with Moses and ultimately, perhaps, God, about the identification of Moses as the preeminent prophet of YHWH.

While the liberationist discourse of scholars of African descent in the Americas rarely addresses women whom the biblical text identifies as prophets in ancient Israel, Randall C. Bailey, an African American liberationist scholar, views the role of Moses’ new wife as the subject/object of the dispute in Numbers 12.<sup>20</sup> Bailey argues that the increased status Moses enjoys as the husband of a Nubian threatens the prophet Miriam. He uses a variety of biblical texts to document the high status the Hebrew Bible accords Nubians and other Africans. Although he does not focus on Miriam, he acknowledges that YHWH speaks to her and that her prophetic function serves to provide her with status in the narrative.

Womanist and feminist discourses in religion are more consistently interdisciplinary than previous male-dominated discussions. Like her liberationist colleagues, Cheryl J. Sanders (an ethicist) is more interested in supposed issues of race than in the prophetic status and role of Miriam.<sup>21</sup> She concludes that Miriam is “turned white” for criticizing Moses’ marriage to a black woman.<sup>22</sup> She does not identify Miriam as a prophet





at all. Racialized readings of this text are also offered by Miriam Winter, who uses biblical studies to undergird her liturgical work.<sup>23</sup>

The scholarship of Alice Ogden Bellis is in conversation with womanists and feminists on Numbers 12.<sup>24</sup> She begins by asserting that Miriam, in Exod 15:20, is the first person the Hebrew Bible identifies as a prophet, male or female. This assertion apparently negates the application of the designation to Abraham in Gen 20:7 and to Aaron as Moses' prophet in Exod 7:1; Bellis does not explain why she does not accept the prophetic characterization of Abraham, if she is aware of it.<sup>25</sup> Bellis rejects the racialized scholarship of black liberationists and some white males that seeks to impose a binary contrast between Miriam (white) and the wife of Moses (black); she finds that both are women of color. Bellis couches the dispute in terms of a simple struggle for power between two prophets whom some people see as having equal divinely imparted gifts. She concludes by sketching out the dominance of the Miriamic tradition that reoccurs throughout the Hebrew Bible.

There is much more feminist biblical scholarship on Miriam than there is on any other female prophet in the Hebrew scriptures. Yet a number of feminist scholars also wrestle with the violence inherent in the prophet Deborah's martial role. Feminist scholars Lillian Sigal and Danna Nolan Fewell find the centrality of violence disturbing.<sup>26</sup> Julia Esquivel finds in this narrative the requisite inspiration and courage for one to risk a violent death in seizing her or his own liberation.<sup>27</sup> Bellis rejects the notion that all violence is immoral.<sup>28</sup>

Susan Ackerman concludes that Deborah is as much of a warrior as is Barak; she notes that the text does not describe either of them as possessing weapons, yet interpretive communities have long assumed that Barak alone did the actual fighting.<sup>29</sup> Given that the biblical text does not identify either Deborah or Barak as a combatant, nor does the text place either of them outside the fray of battle, there is no textual basis for assigning them separate roles in the battle. Ackerman correctly places the disparity in perception of the combat roles of Deborah and Barak in the realm of the reader's culturally conditioned perception. In addition, Ackerman uses the work of Claudia Camp to demonstrate that the Hebrew Bible uses the title "mother in Israel" for women who are wise, who are skilled negotiators, and who will take life when necessary to "protect the heritage of YHWH"; the title is not an indicator of marital or parental status.<sup>30</sup>

One might expect that feminists would turn to the female prophet No'adiah as an agent of resistance, given her clear opposition



to Nehemiah's attempt to exile women and children who do not meet his standards of ethnic purity. However, very little about her is found in feminist projects. For example, Silvia Schroer's work has only one sentence about No'adiah *and* her presumed opposition to Nehemiah's marriage-dissolution project: "Women are also part of the resistance against this project; among them is the prophetess Nadiah [*sic*] an opponent of Nehemiah."<sup>31</sup> Tamara Cohn Eskenazi sees No'adiah as a likely Judahite insider. Otherwise, Nehemiah would have called her foreign, and she suggests that No'adiah had high status in the *Yebud* (Judean) community.<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, Eskenazi stresses the postexilic time frame of No'adiah's ministry. No'adiah, like the woman-prophet with whom Isaiah conceives a child (Isa 8:3), is a witness to the continual prophetic function of women after the exile.<sup>33</sup>

Athalya Brenner offered a brief but nearly comprehensive examination of the female prophets in the scriptures of Israel in 1985.<sup>34</sup> She begins by excluding the woman with whom Isaiah fathers a child from consideration. She acknowledges that giving birth to a child with a symbolic name is a prophetic act, but she says that the anonymous prophet is not described as possessing prophetic powers. She later clarifies that prophetic activity is restricted to oracle making and wonder working. While Brenner allows for the possibility that Huldah was simply better known because of her prophetic work that did not survive her, she still legitimates the sort of inquiry that privileges the prophethood of a male character who is not even named in the narrative over the named female who is designated royal prophet.

Scholarship on Israelite prophets in the late twentieth century is regularly nonsectarian, but it is not value neutral. While the scholars surveyed above were more likely to include texts that describe women as prophets in the scriptures of Israel, they regularly exclude women from the category "prophet." It is also the case that feminist and womanist scholars have not focused on the prophetic function of women in ancient Israel. In fact, many of their discussions of female prophets are in the context of other conversations. Early or contemporary, feminist and masculinist scholars lack a systematic evaluation of the function of women whom the biblical writings designate as prophets.

There is, of course, women's scholarship that is not feminist. In 1991, Deborah Gill, who does not identify as a feminist, defended a dissertation on the female prophets.<sup>35</sup> She observes, "There is little evidence that women have special access to prophetic insight. The fact is, that *the predominance of women in the prophetic role is by default*—it is



virtually the only religious leadership role in which women are permitted participation” (emphasis in original). Gill’s woeful ignorance of Israelite and ancient Near Eastern religion is demonstrated by the lack of archaeological, sociological, or cultural anthropological scholarship in her unpublished dissertation.

Twenty-first-century scholarship is, of course, a relatively recent enterprise. It may be too soon to evaluate the current body of scholarship in terms of trends. However, it is apparent that some scholars are finding interdisciplinary approaches, particularly in the social sciences, to the Hebrew scriptures quite useful. The social origin of the biblical text, specifically its origin as the product of a religious and political elite and as a witness to the lives and practices of the ancient Israelites, severely compromises its objectivity. Archaeological evidence cannot in all cases flesh out the practices of ancient peoples and prove whether or not religious practices conformed to those advocated in sacred texts. Cultural and anthropological models can, however, provide, by analogy, models of practice from similar societies, both ancient and contemporary. Obviously, one cannot make direct parallels, but one can make some relevant observations.

Twenty-first-century scholarship is characterized by more frequent discussions in scholarly literature of the label *prophet* as it is applied to women in biblical texts than previous scholarship.

The most recent and thorough treatment of Israelite religion is that of Ziony Zevit.<sup>36</sup> While he pays significant attention to the plurality of Israelite religions, including mantic religion, which he occasionally uses as a synonym for prophecy, he does not adequately address the women whom the biblical text identifies as prophets. Specifically, Zevit classifies all female prophets as “mantic[s]” whom he equates with “pre-literary” Israelite society. He discusses a number of the biblical texts in which female prophets appear, without naming the prophets and, frequently, without discussing their activities.

Zevit mentions Miriam, however, not as a prophet.<sup>37</sup> His treatment of Deborah establishes that judges function as “adjudicators” among other roles, and he addresses her song as a source for identifying kin groups, whether clans or tribes.<sup>38</sup> Alternatively, he views Josiah’s consultation of Huldah as an example of the commendable piety of “good” kings, all of whom the text associates intimately with a personal/palace prophet. For example, David had Nathan, and Hezekiah had Isaiah.<sup>39</sup> He does make specific reference to Huldah and No’adiah by name, and to the female prophet with whom Isaiah



conceives.<sup>40</sup> He identifies her as a “prophetess” whose oracle is fulfilled. And he uses Huldah’s narrative to argue simultaneously for the “weakness” of prophets in the monarchical administration and the institutionalization of their authority.<sup>41</sup>

Zevit also characterizes female prophets as practitioners of magic arts specializing in the control of life and death. His basis for this assertion is Ezek 13:19.<sup>42</sup> Apparently, he extends Ezekiel’s condemnation—found in verse 19, and by reading verses 17 and 18—backward and forward through time in order to apply it to all women who prophesy, rather than only to those whom the text actually mentions. The female prophets described in Ezek 13:17-18 are those who “prophesy out of their own hearts” and fabricate veils and wristbands. It is unclear whether the women undertook this work for magical, divinatory, therapeutic, or intercessory purposes. His arguments that these women are health practitioners specializing in pregnancy and childbirth is interesting and may be supported by other texts describing women’s rituals.

Twenty-first-century scholarship is also characterized by the naming of all the women who are referred to as *prophets* in the biblical text, even if they are immediately discounted from serious consideration as prophets. While Miriam has been a frequent subject of Jewish and Christian scholarship, other women are at least being evaluated on a regular basis.

Susan Ackerman begins her discussion of the five women whom the biblical text calls prophets by discounting the title as applied to Isaiah’s wife. She finds that the production of the child is an entirely commonplace event and, when combined with the namelessness of the woman in question, signifies that the title is a matrimonial honorific.<sup>43</sup> This assertion is entirely unjustified. None of the other female prophets are married to male prophets—Huldah’s husband is a glorified butler!—and the biblical text calls neither Hosea’s wife nor Ezekiel’s wife a prophet. Ackerman’s implication that the biblical text must cite an arguably prophetic oracle or action to prove that the person called *prophet* in the text is indeed a prophet represents a standard that she does not apply to males bearing the title.

Based on a comparison of the number of prophets per gender, Ackerman prefaces her discussion of the remaining four female prophets with the assertion that they are “anomalies” rather than “exemplars” of the prophetic tradition of ancient Israel.<sup>44</sup> In general, she finds that the social, political, and cultic upheaval make it possible for a woman to contend for power within the community, particularly when claiming



religious authority. Ackerman's theory that women are more able to grasp and wield power in tumultuous times is substantiated by Deborah's prophethood.

Ackerman has difficulty accounting for the context from which Miriam's prophetic identity is supposed to have emerged because she does not recognize Israel as an entity that could have been destabilized at the time the Exodus is purported to have occurred. She proposes that it is Israel's "liminal" state as an entity caught in the crucible of being formed that provides the instability required for a woman to achieve meaningful religious power in the putative community.<sup>45</sup> In the same manner, she identifies the political and religious instability that precedes Josiah's reign as the context in which Huldah ascends to power. She suggests that Huldah benefits from her husband's "rank and status within the royal bureaucracy."<sup>46</sup> This stretches credulity; there is no reason to think that one is more likely to regard the spouse of a domestic employee as a trustworthy prophet in ancient Israel than anyone with sufficient charismatic gifts.

Additionally, Ackerman emphasizes the home as a site of particular empowerment for women and suggests that Huldah wields the power that she does, in part, because she works from within her home.<sup>47</sup> However, this conclusion does not account for the provenience of the power of Miriam, Deborah, or No'adiah. She claims that the late date of Ezra-Nehemiah requires that a postexilic audience was meant to comprehend the narrative. Thus, No'adiah and her power struggle with Nehemiah are comprehensible to their intended audience living in a time of great political, religious, and social instability.

Tikvah Frymer-Kensky considers some of the female prophets in her book *Reading the Women of the Bible*. She discusses Deborah (and Yael) in the section "Victors," whom she defines as "the great women of the Bible . . . [whose] names and stories have influenced countless generations."<sup>48</sup> In her section "Voice," Frymer-Kensky examines a group of "female oracles" who function from the period of the Judges to the monarchy and stand "at each critical juncture of Israel's history to proclaim the future."<sup>49</sup> She includes Hannah, the ghost mistress of Endor, Abigail, Huldah, and "Woman as Voice," and additionally reconsiders Deborah.

In her discussion of the story of Deborah, Frymer-Kensky leaves it to the reader to decide whether *esbet lapidoth* should be translated as a spousal identification, "woman/wife of (a man called) Lappidoth," or a character assessment, "woman of torch-flames (literal meaning)."



She finds value in both translations. If Lappidoth is a name, Frymer-Kensky suggests that it could be a pun on Barak's name: *baraq* means "lightning." A married woman could have an authoritative social role in the public arena. Prophetic identity is not inconsistent with marriage and (by inference) sexual activity. "Torch-Lady" (Deborah) and "Lightning" (Barak) evoke the heralds of the storm god in Mesopotamian cosmology, and in Judges, Deborah and Barak are the vessels of God, who uses meteorological phenomena to achieve victory. She also offers and discusses the neutral translation option "Lappidoth-woman," which I will not address in detail here.<sup>50</sup> Frymer-Kensky takes seriously the description of Deborah as judge and prophet, finding that she administered disputes and provided oracular decisions on social and political affairs.<sup>51</sup> She also finds, following the LXX reading for Judg 4:8, that Deborah's presence was viewed as equal to that of a divine emissary, as guaranteeing success in battle.<sup>52</sup>

Frymer-Kensky also addresses the prophet Huldah. She is well aware of the trend in masculinist biblical scholarship to question Josiah's choice of Huldah as his preferred prophet in 2 Kings 22. Scholars who question the choice of Huldah usually do so seeking an explanation as to why Jeremiah was not called instead. Frymer-Kensky, like other feminist biblical scholars, attributes the preference for Jeremiah, or sometimes any male prophet, over the female prophet identified in the scriptures to masculinist bias.<sup>53</sup> She makes the point that kings had the privilege of choosing their prophets but, in doing so, grants validity to the question of why Huldah was preferable to Jeremiah. Her suggestion is that Huldah and Jeremiah were "exceedingly close" in "message and terminology."<sup>54</sup> Her recognition of Jeremiah as the expected royal prophet undercuts her own argument about Josiah's exercise of royal privilege, since she acknowledges that Jeremiah was an outsider to the court. Although she astutely perceives the bias inherent in the masculinist questioning of Huldah's prophethood, her arguments defending the expectation of Jeremiah the outsider to suddenly be transformed into an insider prophet seem to, unfortunately, give legitimacy to these questions. Ultimately, in this case, Frymer-Kensky places authority on the canonical shape of the final text—the inclusion of a book of Jeremiah and lack of a book of Huldah—rather than on the contents of the text: King Josiah called the prophet Huldah to validate the scroll, not the prophet Jeremiah.

Irmtraud Fischer's *Gotteskundlerinnen: zu einer geschlechterfairen Deutung des Phänomens der Prophetie und der Prophetinnen in der*



*Hebräischen Bibel* (Women Proclaiming God: On a Gender-Neutral Interpretation of the Phenomenon of Prophecy and Female Prophets in the Hebrew Bible) is the most recent work that takes all of the female prophets of the Hebrew scriptures into consideration and even expands the category, as I will in the concluding chapter of this work.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps Fischer's most compelling insight is her reevaluation of the entire prophetic enterprise in light of the texts regarding female prophets. She finds that the number of narratives about female prophets points to the prominence of women, particularly female prophets, in the crucial period of canon formation. Fischer further finds that lay and prophetic women insisted that these prophetic narratives be preserved. Fischer's finding here supports my observation that female prophets occur in each section of the canon, set in each phase of Israelite history, and therefore cannot be read as aberrations, but as a consistent expression of Israelite religious practice, undergirding the necessity to preserve these narratives. Fischer examines the language of prophetic discourse and notes the inherent difficulty in gendered languages such as Hebrew, German, and, to a lesser extent, English in identifying female persons in mixed-gender groups. We will never be able to identify all of the female prophets in the Hebrew scriptures because of the rules attendant upon the masculine plural in which "a single male subject turns a plural of thousands of women into a group described in a masculine way."<sup>56</sup> Her solution is to translate *nevi'im* as "prophetically gifted human persons (*prophetisch begabte Menschen*)."<sup>57</sup> While this is a helpful neutral translation, as opposed to the standard German *Propheten* (prophets), it does not help identify women who are lost to the binaries of grammar in the text.<sup>57</sup>

Fischer also reconsiders the office of the Mosaic prophet. Unlike previous generations of male scholars, she does not identify Joshua as Moses' successor, but rather Deborah. Deborah is prophet, warrior, and judge. Joshua is only a soldier, neither judge nor prophet. Deborah is also Miriam's successor as a poet-prophet with gifts of musical composition. Deborah represents a unification of the Mosaic prophetic tradition that was divided between Miriam and Moses, and, by some reckoning, also Aaron.<sup>58</sup> Miriam is an important prophet for Fischer, one whose lineage continues through the canon to the prophet No'adiah. Miriam and No'adiah are opposed to ethnocentric restrictions on conjugal unions (as apparently was Moses, whose two recorded marriages were exogamous). Miriam opposes Moses; No'adiah opposes Nehemiah. In both disputes, the interpretation of Torah was at the center. The



identity of these women as prophets, and therefore their authority to interpret, was not disputed. However, the dispute between Miriam and Moses over exogamy—which he practiced consistently—is regularly characterized as being about who is the sole authorized interpreter of Torah.<sup>59</sup> No'adiah is particularly significant for Fischer because, as the head of a Jerusalem-based prophetic guild, she is a potential king-maker like Elisha before her. Fischer makes the useful point that the only member of the prophetic guild who had the authority to anoint a king was the leader, the father or mother of the guild. Indeed, Sanballat's charge in Neh 6:7 is that Nehemiah has set up his own prophetic guild to anoint Nehemiah king. Fischer's reading is that Sanballat is to bring Nehemiah to the temple, to the place that represents No'adiah's authority, which is why Nehemiah names her in the prayer against Sanballat.<sup>60</sup> This fresh take on the passage helps explain why all of the prophets in Jerusalem support No'adiah and oppose Nehemiah.

Her understanding of the context of canon formation shapes Fischer's reading of the birth-giving prophet in Isaiah 8. Locating the critical work in the Persian period, she also assigns credit for perpetuating the story of the prophetic production and naming of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz to that time period.<sup>61</sup> Fischer finds that the anonymity of the pregnant prophet points to her prominence. Specifically, the definite article *ha-* indicates to her that the woman was so well known that her name did not need to be spoken.<sup>62</sup> Accepting her Chronology as support for her argument, it is conceivable that the many references to human women and female imagery in Deutero-Isaiah stem from a normative and pervasive experience of female prophecy.<sup>63</sup>

One additional very useful aspect of Fischer's work is that she opens the door to identifying other women in the canon as prophets. She does so with the female ghost master of Endor and with the sanctuary guardians of Exodus 38.<sup>64</sup> In the concluding chapter of this work, I will also offer some new prophetic identifications. I will not follow Fischer's identification of the ghost-summoning woman at Endor as a prophet because her religious work revolves around ghosts or spirits and not YHWH as the object of inquiry. However, I will follow Fischer's reading of the work of the sanctuary guardians.

With the notable exception of Irmtraud Fischer's work, there are remarkably few book-length examinations of all the women whom the Hebrew scriptures identify as prophets. While some texts explore the female biblical prophets in light of the literary record of their ANE contemporaries, and some explore the women-prophets of the





scriptures of Israel in light of rabbinic discourse, I am aware of no other work that combines ANE, biblical, and rabbinic sources on female prophets.

### — SUMMARY —

What follows is an exploration of prophecy practiced by women in ancient Israel and, to some extent, in the ANE. In this work, I understand prophecy broadly as multiple techniques of inquiry of the Divine and as the interpretation of various natural and supernatural phenomena practiced by religious professionals. This project begins with the premise that the framers of the scriptures of Israel apply the term *prophet* (*nevi'ah*—feminine singular; *naviy'*—masculine singular) to characters in the scriptures of ancient Israel in a fluid manner and that the term continues to represent a variety of meanings, particularly in English and in biblical Hebrew. By *fluid*, I mean the lack of rigid boundaries around use of the term *prophet* and the lack of consistent ideological content indicated by the use of the term. For example, the biblical text almost universally depicts prophets as vessels of divine communication. At the same time, it individually presents prophets as intercessors, wonder workers, oracle makers, and interpreters of dreams and the words of previous prophets. Each text identifying someone as prophet does so based on a variety of criteria that are not standardized.

The five women the Hebrew scriptures specifically identify as prophets are Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, the unnamed woman with whom Isaiah fathers a child (*ha-nevi'ah*), and No'adiah. The rabbis modify this brief roster in the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash (*Midrashim*); therefore, I will briefly consider rabbinic texts in order to sketch out the interpretive trajectory of considerations of the female prophets in the Hebrew scriptures.<sup>65</sup> This rabbinic modification consists of adding and removing women from the canonical list along with proof texts for those who are preserved and added. It is interesting to note that these texts offer no reasons for the removal of women from the list.

Examining the biblical material in light of the rabbinic material is important because of the linguistic continuum between the two corpora and because rabbinic exegesis has significantly influenced the reception and perception of biblical texts. As the phenomenon of female prophecy continues into the Christian New Testament, I will explore female prophets in the New Testament and early Christian literature.



The flexible interpretation and application of prophetic identity by the tradents of early rabbinic and Christian literature, especially when applied to women in the Hebrew scriptures, provide the impetus for the present work, which will examine female prophets in ancient Israel, with selective comparisons to female prophets in the ANE. I will understand *prophecy* to have been a somewhat plastic category as employed by biblical tradents and redactors. For this reason, none of the language, signs, or actions the biblical text designates as prophetic will be excluded in order to account for the full semantic and ideological range of the term as used by generations of tradents.

In chapter 1, “Overview of Biblical Prophets and Related Roles,” I will explore the technical vocabulary of prophetic inquiry and decision-making science in the Hebrew Bible. I will also examine the flexible application of the title “prophet” to women in particular. At the end of this chapter, I will expand some texts in which the masculine plural *ne’viyim* is most likely masking the presence of female prophets.

The phenomenon of prophecy was not (and is not) unique to biblical Israel. There are analogs to virtually every aspect of Israelite culture and religion in the broader ANE. Female religious functionaries in the ANE vastly outnumbered their counterparts in ancient Israel as represented in the Hebrew scriptures. There are more Akkadian titles describing female prophets than there are useful English translations of the distinctions between their offices.

In chapter 2, “Female Prophecy around Biblical Israel,” I will examine examples of female prophets in Mari, Nineveh, and Emar, as well as pertinent vocabulary and preserved oracular material, and I will compare them to the female prophets preserved in the scriptures of Israel. The practice of prophecy by female religious professionals in Mari is of particular interest because of a number of elements shared with Israelite prophecy, although prophecy in Mari predates prophecy in Israel (1776–1760 B.C.E.). Ninevite prophetic practices performed by female religious professionals are also of interest because of their Chronology. These prophecies occur during the reigns of Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.E.) and Ashurbanipal (668–627 B.C.E.) in the neo-Assyrian period and during the reign of Manasseh in Judah. The mention of Esarhaddon’s enthronement in 2 Kgs 19:37 precedes the introduction of Hezekiah of Judah and his royal prophet Isaiah in 2 Kings 20. The *munabbiātu* (female prophet) of Emar deserves special attention in that this noun and its root verb, *nābū*, are likely Akkadian cognates of biblical Hebrew *n-b-*’ (to prophesy), as are its derived nouns, including *navi* and *nevi’ah*.



In chapter 3, “Female Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures,” I will analyze the biblical record as it pertains to female prophets in ancient Israel. Each reference to women as prophets using *n-b-*’ in either nominal or verbal construction will be examined, along with each text in which these women appear.

Miriam is the only female prophet in the Torah. The vast majority of the female prophets in the Hebrew scriptures are in the *Nevi'im* (Prophets): Deborah, Huldah, No'adiah, the anonymous female prophet in Isaiah, the daughters who will prophesy in Joel, and the daughters of the people who prophesy in Ezekiel. No'adiah is the only female prophet named in the *Kethuvim* (Writings). The daughters of Heman, the visionary (a synonym for *prophet*) in David's service who directs his sons and daughters in musical prophecy, are also in the Writings. I am examining these prophets in Hebrew canonical order, which is roughly Chronological, based on their initial activity.

The Hebrew scriptures provide a literary context for exploring the activity of female prophets; they also provide a source for exploring the social, cultural, and religious contexts of female prophetic activity. Each text, no matter how brief, provides some contextual information for the individual or community of female prophets it discloses. In chapter 4, “Female Prophetic Guilds in Context,” I explore the multiple contexts of women whose prophetic identities are constructed in the scriptures of Israel. Specifically, I explore partners in prophecy and prophetic communities. I also examine sociocultural practices and structures such as musical and scribal guilds, and lamentation practices as they relate to prophecy in general and female prophecy in particular.

The female prophets of the Hebrew scriptures are recontextualized in post-biblical Jewish sacred literature. The sheer size of the Jewish sacred canon means that I can address only a small portion of the relevant literature. In the Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash, the rabbis modify the brief roster of female prophets identified in the scriptures of Israel; therefore, I will briefly consider rabbinic texts in order to sketch out the interpretive trajectory of considerations of the Hebrew biblical female prophets.

In chapter 5, “Rabbinic and Christian Trajectories,” I begin with a consideration of female prophets in rabbinic literature and follow with an exploration of Christian literature. For this subject matter, female prophets, the rabbinic materials represent a direct continuation of the biblical materials in that these women and their narratives are re-presented and reinterpreted. None of the female prophets in the



Hebrew scriptures appears in the Christian New Testament; however, Miriam's name is invoked in each of the "Mary's." The New Testament has its own roster and tradition of prophesying women. In this chapter, I will address the Mishnaic traditions around God's faithfulness to Miriam and around Huldah's legacy, which is preserved in the temple gates named for her in Jerusalem. In addition to the canonical prophets Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, the Midrash identifies all of the matriarchs, particularly Sarah and Rachel, as prophets. There is also discussion of the legions of female prophets who will arise in the last days. I will discuss the prophetic status of the matriarchs and rabbinic interpretation of canonical female prophetic narratives. The Talmud identifies Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther as prophets. I will discuss the rabbinic rationale for this.

Following the discussion of the rabbinic materials, I discuss female prophets in the Christian scriptures and *Didache* and draw some conclusions about the biblical, post-biblical, and ongoing trajectories of the female prophetic vocation. In the New Testament, the female prophets are Anna (named for the biblical Hannah, who is identified as a prophet by the rabbis), who lives in the temple and prognosticates according to Luke 2:36; the four virgin daughters of Philip, who have the gift of prophecy (not further characterized) according to Acts 21:9; the female prophets of Corinth, who in 1 Cor 11:5 participate in the public liturgy of the nascent church; and a false teaching prophet who appears in Rev 2:18-28.

The *Didache*, an early Christian document detailing, in part, the rights and responsibilities of the religious leadership, refers to prophets only in the masculine singular and plural. These texts may be relevant here for several reasons. The author appeals to the "ancient prophets" (11:11), presumably of Israel since Christianity understood itself to be heir to the scriptures and tradition of Israel; moreover, grammatically, *prophētai* (prophets, masculine plural) can include women and men. In both ancient Israel and nascent Christianity, there were male and female prophets, and both biblical Hebrew and Koine Greek use the masculine plural as an inclusive plural.

There are, I contend, more female prophets in the Hebrew scriptures than have previously been discussed, and certainly more in ancient Israel than have been included in its scriptures. To be clear, the seemingly singular narratives of the individually acknowledged female prophets represent the interests of the canon shapers; they are never identified as the only female prophets of their times. Nothing in the



biblical text limits the number of prophets—male or female—in the text, or in the broader religious experience that is only partially represented by the text, to those prophets actually mentioned as such.

In chapter 6, “Prophetic Constructions,” I will identify as prophets women in the canon who are not called prophets by the canon shapers. Drawing on the behaviors that I have elicited from examining these prophets and those of some of their counterparts in the ANE, I am prepared to construct a prophetic identity for other women in the Hebrew canon who perform the same prophetic practices.

Scholars of biblical and ANE prophecy have rarely considered all of the female prophets in ancient Israel. The exclusion of a group of biblical prophets and their prophetic practices from the study of biblical prophecy produces an incomplete portrait of biblical prophecy and diminishes the value of the scholarship. The lack of primary sources pertaining to female prophets in ancient Israel, as well as a lack of consistent, thorough scholarship on the available sources, coupled with the reluctance of most scholars to take the canonical valence of the *prophet* label at face value and therefore the discounting of female prophets in their scholarship on the prophetic enterprise in biblical Israel, leads to the inevitability of holes in what can be known about these religious intermediaries. Since the biblical text is the primary witness to the prophetic practices of the ancient Israelites, each example of prophetic conduct offers valuable insights into the nature and function of prophecy. The practice of discounting some persons who are called prophets in the biblical text, particularly female persons, continues in the dominant-culture scholarship of the modern era.

Ultimately, it is my aim to facilitate scholarly and religious conversation about all of the prophets of ancient Israel. Just as the Gates of Huldah added to the architecture of the sacred precincts, functioning as an entrance to the temple and ultimately to the holy presence of the God of Israel, so may this construction preserve the heritage of neglected prophets and usher readers onto the sacred pages and into the presence of the Divine. In the words of Huldah, “So says YHWH, the God of Israel, ‘Because of the words that you have heard, you have softened your heart. . . . You shall be gathered to your grave in peace.’”