Women Prophets in the Old Testament
Christine Marchetti

Those who seek an intimate relationship with God often turn to the prophets of the OT for inspiration. Commentaries such as Abraham Heschel’s classic, The Prophets, provide rich insight into these ancient visionaries. Anyone who has read Heschel’s masterpiece may feel a sense of holy envy as they discover “what the prophets mean to us and what they mean to God.” Yet for women, that sense of envy may be heightened by the assumption that the prophets of the OT form a category that largely excludes women. This article investigates the female prophets of the OT, offering a close examination of their texts and contexts. First, the words “prophet” and “prophecy” will be defined. Then, each of the female prophets named in the OT will be discussed, with attention paid to the ways biblical writers, redactors, and commentators may have minimized their impact. Other women in the text who performed prophetic activities will be identified, and the article will conclude with a reflection on female prophecy in ancient Israel.

What is a Prophet and What is Prophecy?
The Hebrew word for “prophet” is nabi, from the verb naba, “to call.” A nabi is called by God. The feminine form is nebiah, “female prophet” or “prophetess.” “Prophets” (pl.) is nebiim. Hebrew is a gendered language; thus, in a mixed group where as few as one male prophet is present, grammar demands that the plural noun be masculine. It is therefore difficult to identify all of the female prophets in the Scriptures.3

The formulaic phrase, “Thus says YHWH,” identifies the prophets as men and women who had access to God and spoke on God’s behalf. This phrase originated in the royal court, but not all prophecy involves oracles delivered to kings. Prophecy had many manifestations and modern scholars persist in probing its meaning.3 Joseph Blenkinsopp rightly notes that the prophetic books themselves represent “only a small and . . . anomalous minority” of all the prophets in ancient Israel.4 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 22:15–17); inquiring of YHWH (Jer 37:7); delivering YHWH’s oracles (Isa 10:24); anointing kings (1 Kgs 1:34); resolving disputes (2 Chr 28:9–15); working wonders (1 Kgs 17); mustering troops (Judg 4); leading battles (Judg 5); archiving oracles in writing (2 Chr 13:22); and experiencing visions (Isa 1). Thus the writers of Scripture use the word “prophet” in a fluid way.5

Given the flexibility of the term, who might be called a “prophet”? According to Lester Grabbe, anyone summoned by God—male or female—can prophesy. Female prophets in the OT are simply prophets who happened to be female. In ancient Israel and throughout the ancient Near East, female prophets possessed the same spectrum of gifts as their male counterparts.6 Women could be prophets because, unlike priests and kings who inherited their positions, prophets were appointed by God.7 The OT does not indicate that the appearance of women prophets was unusual; however, in some instances 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.8 How accurately does the Bible reflect the historical reality of female prophecy in ancient Israel?9 To answer this question, the text must be examined closely.

The Text and its Backstory
In the OT, 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.”10

Miriam
In Exod 15:20–21, Miriam the prophetess leads the women in song and dance after the crossing of the Red Sea. Many scholars believe this text is one of the oldest examples of Israel’s literature. Although Moses’s song (Exod 15:1–18) precedes Miriam’s in the canon, the early date of vv. 20–21 suggests it may have been Miriam, not Moses, who led the first victory celebration of the exodus.11

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Deborah

Debate over Deborah’s role begins when her name first appears in Judg 4:4; Deborah likely means “bee,” though some argue her name arises from the Hebrew dibberah, “she spoke.” Deborah is the woman of Lappidoth, often translated, “wife of Lappidoth.” Lappidoth means “torch,” and some commentators believe Lappidoth and Barak (which means “fire”) are the same person. They conclude that Deborah derived her status from her relationship with Barak. “Woman of Lappidoth” is more likely a descriptor which portrays Deborah as a “woman of torches” or a “fiery woman.”

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. In Judg 4:7, Deborah’s 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, and it was the role of the prophet to verify a battle was truly a holy war of God (1 Kgs 20:13; 22:6).

To the author(s) of Judges, Deborah represents a brief span of renewal within the book’s overarching theme of decline, for what the country needed was a king. However, Deborah’s of renewal within the book’s overarching theme of decline, for what the country needed was a king. Deborah is the woman of Lappidoth, often translated, “wife of Lappidoth.” Lappidoth means “torch,” and some commentators believe Lappidoth and Barak (which means “fire”) are the same person. They conclude that Deborah derived her status from her relationship with Barak. “Woman of Lappidoth” is more likely a descriptor which portrays Deborah as a “woman of torches” or a “fiery woman.”

The Prophetess (Isaiah 8:3)

Some interpreters contend that this unnamed woman was no prophetess at all, and the title “prophetess” was honorific, given to her because she was Isaiah’s wife. There is, however, no proof “the prophetess” was Isaiah’s wife. The wives of other prophets (e.g., Hosea and Ezekiel) are not called “prophetesses,” and other women whom Scripture calls “prophetess” (e.g., Miriam and Huldah) are not married to male prophets. It is likely the title “prophetess” had nothing to do with a woman’s marital status or her husband’s occupation; rather, the unnamed prophetess in Isa 8:3 was probably a member of the nabi class in her own right.

The Daughters of Your People Who Prophesy (Ezekiel 13:17–23)

These women were members of a prophetic guild and are generally regarded as false prophetesses. Ezekiel’s criticism of them is set in the context of his larger complaint against all the prophets (except Ezekiel himself), but the female prophets are accused of making charms for magic or divination. Apparently, they were seen as quite powerful and charged fees for their services (v. 19).

Huldah

The origin of Huldah’s name is uncertain. It may have come from the Hebrew heled, which refers to the duration of life, or from holeed, which means “weasel.”

Huldah’s use of the formulaic phrase, “Thus says YHWH,” identifies her as an official prophet in the royal court. 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 (e.g., Jeremiah or Zephaniah) were not chosen, but the narrator shows no surprise that the “prophet-in-residence” was a woman, and she was treated no differently from her male counterparts.

The account in 2 Kgs 22–23 implies that Josiah’s reforms were a direct consequence of Huldah’s oracle. The Chronicler’s version, however, indicates Josiah began the reforms on his own, prior to the discovery of the scroll, which tends to diminish Huldah’s role. While the primary purpose of these accounts is to establish Josiah as an “observant and zealous” follower of YHWH, the Kings account also proves Huldah was equally important in establishing “the monotheistic worship of YHWH as the sole legitimate expression of ancient Israelite religion.”

Noadiah

Noadiah was the leader of a prophetic guild who opposed Nehemiah (Neh 6:14). She posed a significant threat, prompting
Nehemiah to pray for help. She may have been either a true prophet or a false one, but the text gives no specific reason for Nehemiah’s hostility toward her. Noadiah 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. This brief but important text demonstrates it was not Noadiah’s identity as a prophet that was at stake. Noadiah’s presence proves that female prophets were leaders who continued to have an impact on their communities in the post-exilic period.

**Prophetesses of the Future**

Joel 2:28 describes a future time when all of Israel will receive God’s spirit: young men and young women will prophesy; elders will dream, and young people will see visions. Gafney regards the text as the realization of Moses’s hope that all of YHWH’s people—men and women, young and old—will be prophets (Num 11:29). As is well known, Simon Peter, through the pen of Luke, claimed the fulfillment of this prophecy on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.

**Other Women Who prophesied**

Several other women who are not called “prophetesses” nevertheless performed prophetic activity. Rebekah inquired of YHWH and received a direct answer (Gen 25:21–23). The women in Exod 38:8 who “served” or “assembled” at the door of the tabernacle may have been prophet-warriors who guarded the sanctuary. In Josh 2:9–11, Rahab delivered a prophetic oracle predicting Israel’s victory. Samson’s mother (known only as the wife of Manoah, Judg 13:1–23) received a divine message concerning her pregnancy; she alone (not her husband) was able to interpret it. In 1 Sam 25:28–31, Abigail correctly predicted David’s destiny in a three-fold prophecy that was later repeated by Nathan (2 Sam 7:8, 9, 16). The Queen Mother of Lemuel performed the characteristic prophetic act of oracular proclamation in Prov 31:1–31. Courtly Israelite women were members of mixed-gender and all-female prophetic musical and funerary guilds. In numerous texts such as Hosea 6:5, the use of the masculine plural nebiim, when referring to all the previous prophets YHWH sent, includes women prophets such as those discussed above; these texts should read, “I have spoken by the male and female prophets,” Gafney concludes.

**Summary**

Does the OT accurately reflect the extent 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. Recently, scholars such as Susan Ackerman, who believes women prophets were “anomalies,” continue to question the impact of the prophetesses or dismiss them completely.

**The Story Behind 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 OT. Pastors rarely, if ever, preach on the subject; Sunday schools tend not to teach it. 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. Hopefully, the importance of the female prophets in ancient Israel will eventually be understood and accepted in academic circles and on pastoral and personal levels.

**Conclusion**

The prophets, male and female, are a significant part of the Hebrew Scriptures. Female prophets appear in each phase of the nation’s history, and their stories are recorded in each section of the canon, proving they are not aberrations. They are YHWH’s chosen spokespersons and divinely appointed messengers of YHWH’s will. This study demonstrates that God has called certain women in specific times and places to communicate with humanity. The Scriptures show that female prophets had messages for their times and for ours, and they need to be heard. When female prophets speak—then and now they speak for YHWH.

**Notes**

5. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 1–6, 41.


8. Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 46; Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 1; Stökl, Prophets Male and Female, 8; Blenkinsopp, A History of Prophecy, 32.

9. Kelle 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.” Kelle, “The Phenomenon of Israelite Prophecy,” 277.

10. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 19; Stökl, Prophets Male and Female, 1.

11. Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 15, 40. For details on the redaction of Exod 15, see Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 185.


15. Gafney believes that both Miriam and Aaron were punished with a skin disease: “the disease is imposed twice: the first time, Miriam is diseased, and the second time… Aaron was diseased.” Gafney translates v. 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 there and there, diseased skin!” In v. 11, Gafney concludes, “Aaron examines himself and finds certainly guilty, and possibly the disease” (Daughters of Miriam, 83–85).


17. Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 121; Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 85.


19. The name “she spoke” reinforces Deborah’s identity as one who spoke for YHWH. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 90; Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 51.


21. 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; Hackett successfully refutes the notion that Barak was the “real judge” in the story. See also Sasson, Judges 1–12, 257.


23. Blenkinsopp, A History of Prophecy, 51; Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 48. Deborah gave YHWH’s command to Barak and she predicted military success (Jdg 46–7); 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, Daughters of Miriam, 91.


27. Herzberg, “Deborah and Moses,” 18. Hackett insists the phrase “judging Israel” (4:4) means Deborah was the nation’s chief executive officer, “In the Days of Jael,” 22.


29. The song in Judg 5 is one of the oldest texts in the OT, and it predates Judg 4. Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 45; Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 91. Judg 5:15 depicts Deborah engaged in battle, but the narrator in Judg 4 seems to wish to separate Deborah from the frontlines. Skidmore-Hess believes the “diminishing of Deborah” begins with the redaction history of Judg 4 and 5. Skidmore-Hess, “Dousing the Fiery Woman,” 6.


32. Claudia V. Camp, “Huldah,” in Meyers, Craven, and Kramer, Women in Scripture, 96; Sasson, Judges 1–12, 255. Ackerman believes Huldah’s status was borrowed from her husband, who was a court official (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chr 34:22), but Gafney argues that Huldah’s husband, Shallum, the wardrobe keeper, was merely a “glorified butler.” Ackerman, “Why Is Miriam,” 58–59; Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 12.

33. 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, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 45; Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 100.

34. 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, Daughters of Miriam, 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. Perhaps Josiah, expecting an oracle of judgment against the monarchy, needed Huldah’s “compassionate and merciful tone.” Rachel Neiman, “The Prophetess Huldah: Her Message of Hope,” Women in Judaism, 2002, Torah.org, 1995–2007, n.p., http://www.torah.org/learning/women/class51.html.


36. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 96.


38. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 97.

40. 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, n.p., http://www.claudemariottini.com/2013/08/23/isaiahs-wife/htm; Burns, 43; Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 12; 103–5; Grabbe, “Her Outdoors,” 24.

41. Blenkinsopp, A History of Prophecy, 262; Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 119–30. The unnamed prophetess in Isa 8:3 may be the “young woman” (almah) mentioned in Isa 7:14; the word almah refers to female temple musicians in Ps 68:25. Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 44.

42. Mariottini, “Isaiah’s Wife”; Blenkinsopp, A History of Prophecy, 103; Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 43–44.

43. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 104.


45. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 108.


47. The Masoretic Text uses the feminine nebiah in reference to Noadiah; the LXX uses the Greek masculine prophetes. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 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, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 45.


50. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 15–16.


52. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 110–11; Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 45.


54. The verb tsaba in Exod 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. She believes the common translation of tsaba in this text clearly indicates gender bias. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 153–56.

55. Frymer-Kensky, Reading the Women of the Bible, 298.


58. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 158.

59. For details on prophetic guilds, see Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 119–30.

60. There are 153 occurrences of nebiim in the OT, 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. Unless the narrator specifies that a group of prophets consists solely of men, it may and probably does include women. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 160–64.


63. Gafney, Daughters of Miriam, 15.

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