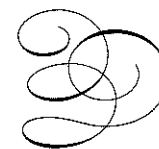


DAUGHTERS *of* MIRIAM

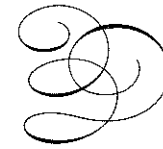


WOMEN PROPHETS
in ANCIENT ISRAEL

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CHAPTER 3



FEMALE PROPHETS *in the* HEBREW SCRIPTURES



THE FIVE INDIVIDUAL FEMALE PROPHETS of the Hebrew Bible are not designated as prophets in each of the texts in which they appear or, for those who make more than one appearance, in subsequent texts. Yet in most cases, it is apparent that narratives in which these women appear recognize the prophetic identity asserted in other narratives. Therefore, all of the texts in which these individual women and the groups in which female prophets were explicitly identified will be considered. Miriam is the only female prophet in the Torah. Most of the female prophets named in the Hebrew scriptures appear in the 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 Writings. There are also the daughters of Heman, the visionary in David's service who directs his sons and daughters in musical prophecy.

For this examination, I am using the Masoretic Text (MT) as the primary textual tradition and examining each reference to women as prophets using *n-b-*' in either nominal or



verbal construction. The narratives in the Septuagint (LXX) largely parallel those in the MT, with a few notable exceptions.¹ The biblical Hebrew noun *nevi'ah*, female prophet, is translated as *prophetis* in the LXX and *nevi'ta'* in the Targumim and is the most common indicator of female prophecy in the Hebrew scriptures. The *hitpael* participle, *hammitnabbe'oth*, describes female prophecy in one text. The verbal constructions *venibbe'u* and *hanibbe'im* (K, *haniv'im*, Q) may each indicate female prophecy. (K, "Ketiv—written" refers to what is written in the MT; Q, "Qer—read," refers to what is read when the MT has margin notes indicating a scribal correction.) The masculine plural verbs have dual, male, and female subjects: "Your sons and daughters will prophesy" and "those [subsequently identified sons and daughters] who prophesy." I am examining the women identified as female prophets in canonical order, which is roughly Chronological, based on their initial activity.

A note about the names of biblical characters is in order here. The traditional names used in standard English translations of the Bible have come into English usage through combinations of languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, and occasionally others. There is very little standardization. For example, the names of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah are both spelled with the Hebrew letter that corresponds to *y*. Isaiah has come through Hebrew to Latin; Jeremiah has come through German. (All names beginning with a *j* come through German, as there is no *j* in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin.) In the translations that follow, I use the names of biblical characters with which the reader is most likely to be familiar. I am including their names as they appear in the respective manuscripts in parentheses after their first mention in each text where there are differences.²

— MIRIAM (MIRYAM)³—

Exod 2:1 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. *2* The woman conceived and gave birth to a son; and when she saw him—that he was beautiful—she⁴ hid him three months. *3* When she was no longer able to hide him, she got a papyrus basket for him and plastered it with tar and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the River.⁵ *4* His sister⁶ stood at a distance, to discern what would happen to him.



5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the River, while her women-servants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. *6* When she opened it, she saw him. The baby boy was crying, and she took pity on him. She said, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children." *7* Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?" *8* Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the young woman went and called the baby's mother. *9* Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this baby and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the baby and nursed him. *10* When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "because from the water I drew him."⁷



*Exod 6:20 (LXX)*⁸ And Amram took Jochbed (Yocheved) the daughter of his father's brother for a wife, and she bore to him both Aaron and Moses, and Mariam their sister: and the years of the life of Amram were a hundred and thirty-two years.



Exod 15:20 Then Miriam (Miryam) the woman-prophet, Aaron's (Aharon's) sister, took the drum in her hand; and all the women went out⁹ behind her with drums and with dancing. *21* And Miriam answered them:¹⁰

"Sing to YHWH, who has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider YHWH has thrown into the sea."¹¹



*Num 12:1*¹² And Miriam (Miryam) spoke, also Aaron (Aharon), against Moses (Moshe) on account of the Nubian woman whom he had taken (in marriage), for he had indeed taken a Nubian wife.¹³ *2* And they said, "Indeed, is it only through Moses that YHWH speaks? Does not YHWH also speak through us?" And YHWH heard. *3* Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any earthling on the face of the earth. *4* And YHWH said suddenly to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out you three to the tent of meeting!" And the three of them came forward. *5* And YHWH went



down in a standing cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and the two of them came out. 6 And he¹⁴ said,¹⁵

“Please hear my words—if one becomes your prophet of YHWH,

in an appearance I make myself known to them—in a dream¹⁶ I speak with him.

7 It is not so with my servant Moses—in all my house he is faithful.

8 Mouth to mouth I speak with him¹⁷ and in an appearance and not in riddles—

and the form¹⁸ of YHWH he sees.

So why were you all not afraid to speak against my servant, against Moses?”

9 And the anger of YHWH burned against them and he left. 10 And the cloud turned away from the tent and then and there! Miriam was diseased like snow! And Aaron turned towards Miriam and then and there, diseased skin! 11 And Aaron said to Moses, “It is in me, my lord, please do not place on us the sin in which we have been foolish and in which we have sinned. 12 Please do not let her become as one dead who goes out from the womb of his mother and half of his flesh is consumed.”¹⁹ 13 And Moses cried out to YHWH: “Please God,²⁰ please heal her!” 14 And YHWH said to Moses, “Indeed, if her father had only spit in her face, would she not be ashamed seven days? Let her be shut out seven days outside the camp and afterward she will be gathered.” 15 And Miriam was shut out, outside the camp seven days, but the people would not travel until the gathering of Miriam. 16²¹ And afterward the people traveled from Hazereth and they camped in the wilderness of Paran.



Num 20:1 The Israelites, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. Miriam (Miryam) died there, and was buried there.



Num 26:59 The name of Amram's²² wife was Jochebed (Yochved) daughter of Levi, who was born²³ to Levi in Egypt; and



she bore to Amram: Aaron (Aharon), Moses (Moshe), and Miriam (Miryam) their sister.



Deut 24:9 Remember what²⁴ YHWH your God did to Miriam (Miryam) on the way when you were going out of Egypt.



1 Chr 5:29 (NRSV 6:3) The children of Amram: Aaron (Aharon), Moses (Moshe), and Miriam (Miryam). The sons of Aaron: Nadab (Nadav), Abihu (Avihu), Eleazar (El'azar), and Ithamar.



Mic 6:4 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and from the house of slavery I redeemed you; and I sent before you Moses (Moshe), Aaron (Aharon), and Miriam (Miryam).



There are explicit references to Miriam in Exod 15:20-21; Num 12:1-15; 20:1; 26:59; Deut 24:9; 1 Chr 5:29 (LXX 5:29; NRSV 6:3); and Mic 6:4 in the MT. In addition, she is named in Exod 6:20, only in the LXX. The unnamed sister of Moses, traditionally identified as Miriam, is introduced in Exod 2:4. In Exodus 15, Miriam is identified as Aaron's sister, but no relationship with Moses is articulated. In the disputation in Numbers 12, the account of Miriam's death in Num 20:1, and the warning in Deut 24:9 to remember what God did to her, no familial relationships are described for Miriam, Moses, or Aaron. However, in the genealogies recorded in Num 26:59; 1 Chr 5:29 (LXX 5:29; NRSV 6:3); and Exod 6:20 (LXX only), Aaron, Moses, and Miriam are identified as the offspring of Jochebed and Amram in the tribe of Levi. Micah 6:4 records that the three, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, were prophets sent by God but does not specify a relationship between them.²⁵ The lack of consistent articulation of Miriam as the sister of both Moses and Aaron, combined with the namelessness of Moses' sister in Exodus 2, calls into question the identification of the prophet Miriam with the women referenced in each of these texts. Miriam's age throughout her saga is also difficult to estimate. If we read the “sister,” in Exodus 1, as Miriam, then she is older than Moses, but it is



impossible to relate her in terms of age to Aaron. However, based on the narrative, she must be old enough to walk and talk, more than that, to negotiate and advocate. Exodus 7:7 says that Aaron is three years older than Moses.

It is possible that narratives of more than one woman were conflated into the Miriam saga. The author/editors of Micah and Chronicles were clearly relying on earlier material, as were the translators and editors of the Septuagint. This leaves us with only the genealogy in Numbers 26 in the MT identifying Miriam as the sister of both Aaron and Moses. This identification is projected onto the other texts that mention Miriam, Moses, and Aaron in canonical and traditional readings, which suggest a strong Miriamic tradition supported by these diverse surviving narratives.

Miriam of the Exodus is described as a singer, dancer, and percussionist in Exodus 15, where the prophecy attributed to her is one of the oldest²⁶ portions of the Hebrew scriptures: "All sing to YHWH, for YHWH has triumphed triumphantly; horse and rider YHWH has thrown into the sea." Musical performances, particularly when accompanied by percussive instruments, are identified as prophetic performances in 1 Samuel 10 and 1 Chronicles 25. In 1 Samuel, the members of the prophetic guild play the harp, hand drums, flute, and lyre while they prophesy. In 1 Chronicles, the children of Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun prophesy with lyres, harps, and cymbals in the worship system organized by David. First Chronicles 25:5 specifies that Heman is a visionary in the service of the king and has fourteen sons and three daughters. The next verse states that all of them served under their father in the musical guild.

As is generally the case when a prophet is introduced, prophetic action follows prophetic introduction.²⁷ As a prophet, Miriam conducts the first religious musical performance in post-Exodus Israel; it is characterized by an exhortation to worship through song, charismatic singing and dancing led by women playing *tuppim*, hand drums.²⁸ As noted previously, Miriam's age is virtually impossible to estimate. However, Moses is eighty and Aaron is eighty-three when they began to demand the freedom of their people (Exod 7:7); Miriam is perhaps five, seven, or more years older than Moses. Miriam is a mature, perhaps elderly woman when she leads the people through the Sea of Reeds; she is at least an octogenarian, perhaps even a nonagenarian. Miriam's prophetic identity is revealed in the text at the moment she and her dancing disciples perform the song of thanksgiving that she choreographed to



celebrate salvation through the waters of the Sea of Reeds. Her preserved prophetic activities include engaging in interpretive prophecy; by tradition, facilitating the birth of future generations; and miraculously watering her flock from the well that God gave to her.²⁹

In Numbers 12, Miriam is afflicted with a skin-ravishing disease by YHWH after a disputation over Moses' role as primary prophet. The passage can be read either as a single heavily redacted narrative or as two (or more) heavily redacted narratives depending on whether one considers the account of Moses' remarriage to be integral to the subsequent dispute. I read this text as one heavily redacted text designed to demonstrate Moses' superiority as a prophet in response to the argument involving a united Miriam and Aaron against Moses about his role as senior prophet in light of his recent remarriage. I further find the context for the marriage and ensuing disputation in Moses' divorce and abandonment of his previous wife, Zipporah, and their children in Exodus 18.

I suggest that the initial compound subject and other indications of plurality in the text of Numbers 12 indicate that both Miriam and Aaron were the complainants before the text was redacted. The specific indicators of plurality are in verse 1, "She spoke, Miriam and Aaron"; verse 2, "And they asked, 'Does he (YHWH) not also speak through us?"; verse 5, "He (YHWH) called Aaron and Miriam and they went out"; verse 8, "Why were you two not afraid?"; and verse 11, "Please do not punish us." The surviving verb forms may indicate the prominence of a preexisting Miriamic tradition that was not fully suppressed, as well as a much later attempt (during the time of the priestly contribution to the Pentateuch) to reassign all iniquity to Miriam and to preserve or establish a mythic history of cultic purity for Aaron. The dual subject of verse 1 very probably represents the original solidarity between Miriam and Aaron on the issue of the challenge, and their equal responsibility for the consequences to be borne. Miriam is the person to whom the challenge is ascribed in verse 1; however, it is Aaron whom YHWH names first when calling the two of them to step forward away from Moses in verse 5. As Miriam was an authentic prophet of YHWH, and Aaron was merely the prophet of Moses, who was in turn the prophet of YHWH, her name is listed first to reflect her standing in the community, not an imaginary hierarchy of guilt.

A secondary issue is the context of Miriam's challenge. I read her challenge as based on Moses' recent behavior in divorcing Zipporah and marrying the unnamed Nubian woman.³⁰ Moses had previously



married Zipporah and sent her away (*shillucheyba*); in other words, he had divorced her, in Exod 18:2.³¹ *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (BDB)* suggests that the term *shillucheyba* is a noun meaning “dowry” or “parting gift”; in this reading, the dowry is sent away, while *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT)* sees it simply as dismissal. If they are correct, Zipporah herself still would have been sent away, as the return of the dowry would have signaled the return of the bride and the end of the marriage. The NRSV has this sense, translating “sending away” where the NJPS has “sent home.” Nahum Sarna argues that the choice of *sent home* “is by no means certain” and that neither “dowry” nor “sending home” makes sense in this context.³²

This “sending away” can be understood as divorcing based on the usage of the word in other texts (i.e. Deu 22:9, Mal 2:16) and on Zipporah’s subsequent return to her father’s tent with her children and all of her possessions. An understanding of Moses’ sending away of his first wife as divorce suggests that the Nubian in question was a second, but not polygamous, wife. However, Jethro later attempts to return Zipporah and her children to Moses (Exod 18:2-7). The text does not state that he took them back; rather, it leaves the opposite impression, which does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of a divorce but certainly reduces the possibility that Moses reunited with Zipporah and suddenly married an unidentified Nubian. In fact, Moses appears to ignore his wife and children as he warmly and affectionately greets Jethro and escorts him into his tent, presumably leaving Zipporah and her children standing outside. Zipporah is never mentioned again after Exod 18:6. The spectacle of a recently remarried Moses facing his abandoned wife and children in the presence of her formidable father from whom he learned the traditions associated with the worship of YHWH is provocative, and it is what I understand as the provocation leading to Miriam’s challenge.³³ The relevance of her challenge when read in the context of Moses’ remarriage is that his behavior is problematic and potentially disqualifies him from preeminent prophet status. YHWH’s response does not address the context but affirms that Moses’ status is not affected by anything as mundane as his matrimonial behavior.

In Numbers 12, Miriam is never called a prophet, but the narrative is an account of a dispute between her and Moses (with Aaron in a supporting role on her side) over prophetic identity and authority. Prophetic identity is constructed as being the spokesperson of YHWH in 12:2: “Has YHWH spoken only through Moses? Has he



not spoken through us also?” YHWH affirms Moses in a theophany as the preeminent prophet, but the prophetic identities of Miriam and Aaron are also affirmed, though granted in an inferior way. Moses is both proto-prophet and prophetic archetype, never to be matched.

Num 12:6 [YHWH] said,

“Please hear my words—if one becomes your prophet of YHWH,

in an appearance I make myself known to them—in a dream I speak with him.

7 It is not so with my servant Moses—in all my house he is faithful.

8 Mouth to mouth I speak with him and in an appearance and not in riddles—

and the form of YHWH he sees.



As their punishment for speaking against Moses, Miriam and arguably Aaron are afflicted with a disfiguring skin disease.³⁴ In verse 10, the disease is imposed twice: the first time, Miriam is diseased, and the second time, I contend that Aaron was diseased: “And the cloud turned away from the tent, and then and there, Miriam was diseased like snow! And Aaron turned towards Miriam and then and there, diseased skin!” In verse 11, Aaron examines himself and finds certainly guilt, and possibly the disease. “And Aaron said to Moses, ‘It is in me, my lord, please do not place on us the sin in which we have been foolish and in which we have sinned.’”

Readings of Numbers 12, influenced by contemporary race relations and critical race theory in the West, have obscured the context of this text and the text world it creates and preserves. However, the pre-modern, postbiblical *Targum Onkelos* equates “beauty” with “Nubian” by rendering *hakkushit* (the Kushite woman) as *shaphireta*’ (the beautiful woman). A multitude of scholars from Cain Hope Felder to Phyllis Triple interpret the comparison to snow to mean that Miriam became as *white* as snow.³⁵ The emphasis on whiteness assumes that Miriam was being punished for speaking about Moses’ African wife and that Miriam is receiving a sort of poetic justice for her racist objection to the marriage by being turned white for speaking against a presumed interracial marriage. The issue of whiteness is present even when the scholar in question reads the narrative in terms of a more



general power struggle, as does Tribble. (Whiteness is emphasized by the interpretive choice "white as snow" as opposed to "flaky as snow.") One major difficulty with this approach is the assumption of racism in the biblical world that underlies this hypothesis. Recent scholars have argued effectively against the presumption of this kind of racism in the ancient world.³⁶ Further, the old notion that leprosy is a divinely inflicted punishment for sin, and the linguistic leap from "snow" to "white," reflects the contemporary racial assumptions of the commentator. It cannot be overemphasized that the word "white," *lavan*, is not in this text.³⁷

Bellis and Abrams among others have suggested that "leprous as snow" can be interpreted as "flaky/scaly like snowflakes," "cold/dead as snow," or "wet as snow."³⁸ Acquired leukoderma, vitiligo, is a relatively common affliction of women of color in which portions of their skin lose pigment and become scaly in texture. It can disappear and reappear, seemingly at random. Adams points out that this expression only occurs three times in the Hebrew Bible (Exod 4:6; Num 12:10; and 2 Kgs 5:27), and its victims are all prophets or the disciples of prophets who have in some way transgressed. One possibility for this association between diseased skin and prophetic intermediaries is that, since the notion that diseased skin indicated divine disfavor, a prophet with such an affliction would lose the ability to receive a message from God and thus her or his livelihood.

The possibility that it is Moses and not YHWH who has caused all of this suffering radically changes the interpretative applications of this text. In verse 9, YHWH leaves before the imposition of the disease in verse 10; one implication is that Moses has afflicted Miriam. This reading is supported by Aaron's first intercession in verse 11, in which the human form of *adon, adoni* (lord, my lord, a common form of address for human males that is read in place of the divine name indicated by the Tetragrammaton, YHWH), is used rather than the Tetragrammaton, pointing to Moses and not YHWH as the addressee. This verse suggests that Aaron is also afflicted with the skin disease. When the cloud departs, Miriam is diseased. When Aaron turns, there is a repetition of the exclamation, *metzora'at*, disease! (The NRSV adds at the end of the verse that Aaron "saw that she was leprous"; the text only has "then and there, diseased skin," without specifying that Aaron saw or that Miriam was diseased.) My reading is that the second imposition of disease was on Aaron. Talmud *Bavli, Shabbat* 97a records that Rabbi Akiba also held this view. The LXX Num 12:10



has: "Look there! Mariam was leprous, as snow; and Aaron looked upon Mariam, and, look there! She was leprous," suggesting that Miriam was diseased twice.

In the MT, Num 12:11, Aaron says, "It is in me, my lord, please do not place on us the sin in which we have been foolish and in which we have sinned." I read that Aaron is crying out that the skin disease is also in him. Notice that he asks to be absolved of the sin, which he confesses he committed with Miriam. The "placing" of the sin in this reading would be the imposition of the skin disease. The LXX Num 12:11 also emphasizes that both Aaron and Miriam have sinned: "Do not place sin on us, for we were ignorant when we sinned."

Miriam is banished for seven days, after which the Israelites refuse to leave Hazeroth without her in verse 15; after her "gathering," they depart for Paran. The strength of the Miriamic tradition is revealed in the narrative of the refusal of the people to leave Miriam behind after her affliction; the congregation would not continue to the Promised Land until the "gathering of Miriam."

The mystery of Miriam's death corroborates her prophetic identity; each of the three prophets of the Exodus narrative, Miriam, Moses (Deut 34:5-7), and Aaron (Deut 10:6; 32:50), dies in the wilderness without the stipulation of a cause. No details are given of Miriam's death or burial; the mention of both of those events in the biblical text, particularly the location of the grave, is a marker of cultural prominence. The account of her death is recorded in Numbers 20, suggesting her status in the community.³⁹ Her canonical epitaph is in Mic 6:4, which preserves the Miriamic tradition, presenting Miriam as one of the three leaders of Israel, ordained by God in the wilderness. The canonical and cultural witness to her legacy is the great number of women who bore her name in the New Testament, in Palestinian Aramaic inscriptions, in the literature of the communities at Qumran, and in contemporary times.

— DEBORAH (D'VORAH)⁴⁰ —

*Judg*⁴¹ 4:4 Deborah (D'vorah), a woman, a female prophet, a fiery woman,⁴² she was judging Israel at that time. 5 She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel⁴³ in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment.⁴⁴ 6 She sent and called for Barak son of



Abinoam (Baraq ben Avinoam) from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "Did not⁴⁵ YHWH, the God of Israel, command you? Go—march on Mount Tabor, and take ten thousand men from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. 7 I will march towards you to draw to you by the Wadi Kishon Sisera the commander of Jabin's (Yavin's) army, with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand."⁴⁶ 8 Then Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go."⁴⁷ 9 And she said, "I will surely go with you; however, there will be no glory for you on the path you are taking, for YHWH will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman." Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. 10 Barak summoned Zebulun (Z'vulun) and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand men went up with him; and Deborah went up with him. 11 Now Heber the Kenite (Hever the Qeynite) had separated from the other Kenites, the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and had encamped as far away as the Oak in Zaanannim, which is near Kedesh. 12 Sisera was told that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. 13 Then Sisera summoned all his chariots, nine hundred chariots of iron, and all the people who were with him, from Harosheth-ha-goiim to the Wadi Kishon. 14 Then Deborah said to Barak, "Get up! For this is the day on which YHWH has given Sisera into your hand. Is not YHWH going out before you?" Then Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men following him. 15 And YHWH threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before the sword, before Barak. Sisera dismounted from his chariot-seat and fled on foot. 16 And Barak chased after the chariots and the army to Harosheth-ha-goiim. So the entire army of Sisera fell by the sword; not a single one remained.



*Judg 5:1*⁴⁸ Then Deborah (D'vorah) and Barak son of Abinoam (Baraq ben Avinoam) sang on that day, saying:

2⁴⁹ "When long locks are neglected in Israel,
when the people offer themselves willingly—
bless YHWH!⁵⁰

3⁵¹ Hear, O kings; give ear, O rulers; I, to YHWH, I will
sing,



I will craft hymns to YHWH, the God of Israel.

4 YHWH, when you went out from Seir, when you
marched from the field of Edom,
the earth quaked, and the heavens dripped, even the
clouds dripped water.

5 The mountains melted before YHWH, the One of Sinai,
before YHWH, the God of Israel.

6 In the days of Shamgar ben Anath,⁵² in the days of Jael
(Ya'el)⁵³

caravans ceased and travelers traversed the byways.

7 The mighty⁵⁴ grew fat in Israel, they grew fat,⁵⁵
until you arose, Deborah, you arose as a mother in Israel.⁵⁶

8 New gods were chosen, then war was in the gates.⁵⁷
Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in
Israel?

9⁵⁸ My heart is with⁵⁹ the commanders of Israel
who offered themselves willingly among the people.
Bless YHWH!

10 Consider, you all who ride on white donkeys,
you all who sit on robes and you who walk by the way.⁶⁰

11 Louder than the sound of archers among the
watering places,

there they repeat the righteous acts of YHWH,
the righteous acts of his mighty ones⁶¹ in Israel.
Then the people of YHWH went down to the gates.⁶²

12 "Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, utter⁶³ a
song!

Arise, Barak, capture your captives, O son of Abinoam."⁶⁴

13 Then down marched the remnant of the noble;
the people of YHWH marched down to me⁶⁵ against
the mighty.

14 From Ephraim came they whose roots are in
Amalek;⁶⁶

after you, your people, Benjamin (Binyamin);
from Machir⁶⁷ marched down the commanders,
from Zebulun (Z'vulun)⁶⁸ those who bear the staff of the
scribe;

15 the chiefs of Issachar came with Deborah, and
Issachar to Barak;⁶⁹
into the valley they rushed on his heels.



- Among the clans of Reuben (Re'uven) there were great searchings of heart.
- 16 Why did you tarry among the sheepfolds, to hear the piping for the flocks?
- Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.
- 17 Gilead (Gil'ad) settled down beyond the Jordan; and Dan, why did he sojourn in⁷⁰ ships?
- Asher stayed at the seacoast, situated by his landings.
- 18 Zebulun is a people that taunted death with their life; Naphtali too, on the heights of the field.
- 19 The kings came, they fought; then fought the kings of Canaan, at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo; they got no spoils of silver.
- 20 From heaven the stars fought, from their sky-ways they fought against Sisera.
- 21 The torrent Kishon swept them away, the ancient torrent, the torrent Kishon.
- March on, my soul, with strength!
- 22 Then pounded the horses' hoofs with the galloping, galloping of his mighty beasts.
- 23 "Curse⁷¹ Meroz, says the angel of YHWH, curse bitterly its inhabitants, because they did not come to the help of YHWH, to the help of YHWH against the warriors.
- 24 Most blessed of women be Jael (Ya'el), the wife of Heber the Kenite (Hever the Qeynite), most blessed of tent-women.
- 25 He asked water and she gave him milk, in a princely bowl she brought him curds.
- 26 She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the laborer's hammer; she struck Sisera a blow, she destroyed his head, she shattered and penetrated his soft spot.
- 27 Between her legs he collapsed, he fell, he lay still; Between her legs he collapsed, he fell where he collapsed, there he fell utterly destroyed.⁷²
- 28 Out of the window she peered, Sisera's mother cried out as she gazed through the lattice:



- 'Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the hoofbeats of his chariots?'
- 29 Her wisest princesses answer her, indeed, she provided her own answer:
- 30 'Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?— Woman-flesh,⁷³ one or two for each soldier; spoil of dyed stuffs for Sisera, spoil of dyed cloth embroidered, two pieces of dyed work embroidered for my neck as spoil?'
- 31 So perish all your enemies, O YHWH! But those who love him will be like the sun rising in its might."
- And the land was pacified for forty years.



Udevorah isbah nevi'ah eshet lapidot hi' shoph'tah—"And Deborah (D'vorah), a woman, a female prophet, a fiery woman, she was judging Israel at that time." The long string of feminine descriptors in Judg 4:4 highlights the gender of Deborah. This construction does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew scriptures; there is no comparable description of a male prophet. Deborah is described as both a prophet, employing *n-b-*' as a feminine noun, and a judge, employing *sh-ph-t* as a feminine substantival participle, in Judges 4.⁷⁴ The term *sh-ph-t* broadly denotes "governing" and can refer to the administration of kings, judges, and chiefs.⁷⁵ The judge herself or himself could be responsible for leading the military, resolving disputes, advocating for the powerless, and making decisions. During Uzziah's reign, when he was stricken with leprosy, a judge ruled in his stead as regent.⁷⁶ A related role, that of *shapit/tu(um)*, governor, is attested at Mari.⁷⁷ Like its Hebrew cognate, the title indicates broad administrative authority.⁷⁸ There the judge managed public works, oversaw religious matters, managed royal property, administered justice, and commanded the military, in addition to serving as a regent in the absence of the monarch. The Ugaritic synonym *thpt* includes ruling the people as well as protecting the powerless.⁷⁹

During the time period covered by the rubric "period of the Judges," premonarchal Israel was in a tense relationship with the Philistines, Phoenicians, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites. Some of the social characteristics of this time period were the lack of a standing army and the lack of centralized worship or centralized administration



of government. Israelite administration portrayed in Judges is basically tribal; the narratives of individual judges focus on the fortunes of their own larger kinship. Nili Sacher Fox finds that judges in the premonarchic period were selected from familial and tribal leaders.⁸⁰ With the exception of Judges 5, the tribes never join forces to defend each other. The lack of supertribal political structure made it possible for leaders to be endorsed based on their ability as opposed to credentials or lineage. Many of the heroes of Judges represent those who were in some manner marginal: women, junior sons, children born outside of primary marriage, and so on. This variety of leaders served to reinforce the underlying theme that the only legitimate leader in Israel was YHWH, so it did not really matter who the human representative was. First Samuel marks the beginning of a shift toward state leadership.⁸¹ There may be the expectation that the biological children or figurative children (disciples) would succeed the judge.⁸² (While Eli is not identified as a judge, his throne suggests an expansion of his priestly duties to include some form of governance.) Judges (chapters 6–8) and 1 Samuel (chapters 1–3) both document the beginnings of the accumulation of power and wealth, as demonstrated by the Gideon and Eli sagas.

Deborah is introduced as a woman, a female prophet, and a female judge rather redundantly in Judg 4:4: “Deborah, a woman, a female prophet, a fiery woman, she was judging.”⁸³ Her name consists of the consonants of *dibberah*, “she spoke,” which I find preferable to the traditional etymology, “bee.”⁸⁴ She is also introduced as “the woman of Lappidoth.” I understand this to be descriptive, “a fiery woman,” rather than a conjugal association. Lappidoth is not otherwise attested as a name and has no patronymic (father’s or ancestral name) as do other male names in Judges. Her narrative is reframed in poetry in chapter 5, which also includes some of the oldest passages in the Hebrew Bible.⁸⁵ She is the judge, prophet, and military commander of a number of confederated tribes.⁸⁶ As a judge, Deborah resolves disputes in addition to serving as a military savior and ruling the tribes over which she has mustering authority. Her seat of judgment is identified in the text (4:5) as being centrally located. Daniel Block finds that Deborah’s judging was an aspect of her prophecy in that she heard the people’s disputes on God’s behalf, she inquired of YHWH on their behalf, and YHWH answered her inquiries. He also suggests that Deborah’s unusual introduction is because she is a both a layperson and a woman, referencing the Deuteronomistic tradition that expected judges to be paired with



priests. Instead, Deborah is stationed between Bethel and Ramah as an alternative to the priesthood, which is viewed as totally corrupt in Judges.⁸⁷

Deborah’s narrative includes the command of YHWH to Barak, a predictive oracle of military victory in verses 6–7: “Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin’s army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.” The text does not preserve a conversation between YHWH and Deborah; none was needed because she functioned as YHWH’s emissary with her own authoritative autonomy.⁸⁸ When Barak refuses to go without her, Deborah pronounces a second, predictive oracle: “YHWH will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (v. 9). Her third oracle is to summon Barak to battle on the appropriate day: “Get up! For this is the day on which YHWH has given Sisera into your hand. YHWH is indeed going out before you.” Deborah functions as the alter ego of YHWH. Her very presence guarantees victory in the same manner as the presence of a divine emissary of YHWH.⁸⁹ Both manuscript traditions of the LXX make this point in their rendering of Barak’s response to Deborah’s command in verse 8: “If you will go with me, then I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go, *for I do not know the day on which the Lord will providentially guide his messenger with me.*” (The italicized portion is unique to the LXX.)

Deborah’s oracles indicate that she is both military strategist and warrior.⁹⁰ The command of YHWH, contained in verse 6, is to take up position on Mount Tabor with the militia of Naphtali and Zebulun. Deborah suggests a flanking move, dividing the troops. Barak objects to this because it means he would be separated from her. Barak’s refusal to march without Deborah suggests that the initial plan was for Deborah to draw out Sisera without Barak while he occupied Mount Tabor. Barak’s need for Deborah’s presence may also indicate that he believes her presence would guarantee victory as though the divine emissary of YHWH were present.⁹¹ It is not clear whether she expected an armed force to accompany her. It is clear that she expected to defeat Sisera herself on the field of battle: “I will give him into your hand.” In the poetry of chapter 5—generally understood to be earlier than the prose of chapter 4—verse 15 states that Deborah led the chief warriors of Issachar while Barak led the troops of Issachar. In spite of the clarity of intent in this text, every commentator consulted dismisses the possibility of a martial role for Deborah.



Here in Judges, Machir (a clan of Manasseh) and Gilead (perhaps replacing Gad) are recognized as full tribes, though they are not so reckoned anywhere else in scripture; there is no mention of the tribe of Judah or Levi. There is also a "tribe" that does not occur anywhere else in the canon, Meroz. Deborah's confrontation of Sisera and his army represents the successful execution of her own military strategy. When YHWH panics Sisera and delivers his army to Barak in 4:14-15, Deborah, functioning in the military-savior aspect of the office of judge, is the vehicle of deliverance.

The older poetic portrayal of Deborah in chapter 5 presents her as a wordsmith. She is credited, along with Barak secondarily, with the authorship of the poem that makes up most of the fifth chapter. In verse 12, however, she alone is identified as the singer. The martial nature of Deborah's songs and oracles situates her in the community that celebrated YHWH as the Divine Warrior.⁹² This is the community that produced and performed the battle-hymns of YHWH and proclaimed the victory of YHWH. The YHWH-rousing songs of Deborah fit the former category, and the celebrations of Deborah and Miriam fit the latter. Deborah's war cry is not preserved but could have been similar to the one preserved in Ps 68:1: "Let God rise up, let God's enemies be scattered; let those who hate God flee before God."

Deborah's portrayal as a warrior for God is complemented by her depiction as "a mother in Israel" in Judg 5:7. These are not oppositional characterizations.⁹³ The appellation "mother" evokes the memory of Elisha's address of Elijah as father in 2 Kgs 2:12; however, Deborah is not portrayed with a community of disciple-children; instead, she is the mother of Israel in the literary construction of the poem. As a mother, Deborah provided military and political security for all of her children. It also appears that she addressed economic injustice, since 5:7 states that the mighty "grew fat" in Israel until Deborah arose, suggesting that under her rule there was a more equitable distribution of resources than before her rule.⁹⁴ While clearly taking credit for the deliverance she provided by her own hand in her song, Deborah shares credit for the victories of the day with her fellow warriors. At the same time, Deborah offers her song and her actions memorialized in song to YHWH, possibly as a call to action (5:2, 9). She honors her predecessor Shamgar ben Anat (5:6) and her comrades-in-arms Barak (5:12) and Jael (5:24). Jael's actions complete the destruction of Sisera and his forces: Deborah and Barak lead their troops to Kadesh to draw out Sisera's troops (4:9-13), and YHWH confuses Sisera's troops (4:15)—



poetically rendered as the stars joining the fight from the heavens (5:20). Barak dispatches the entire army with the sword (4:16), but Sisera himself escapes (4:17). Jael executes him in her tent (4:21); it is ironic that he fell between her thighs or legs, as his mother expects him to return late after raping the women of the conquered people (5:27-30).⁹⁵ While discussing Sisera's delayed return with her women-servants, Sisera's mother muses:

"Are they not finding and dividing the spoil?—
Woman-flesh, one or two for each soldier . . ."



In her musings and in Sisera's imagined actions, captive women are reduced to their reproductive organs: *racham rachamatayim*. The identification of these women with their reproductive systems suggests that they will be made sexually available to their captors, both as conjugal partners to produce progeny and for the immediate exercise of sexual control in the form of rape. The military setting means that there will be no negotiations between families, no dowry, no consent.

Deborah may be unique among the judges in regard to her gender. She is certainly exceptional in terms of her character, indicated by her portrayal in the text. Block concludes that Deborah is the only judge "the narrator casts in an unequivocally positive light," in addition to being the only judge already in divine service before being called up for military action. Also, each judge who succeeded her represented a decline in quality and character.⁹⁶ Deborah's narrative epitaph is found in the single line of prose at the end of chapter 5: "Because of her the land had rest for forty years."



— HULDAH (CHULDAH) —

2 *Kgs* 22:8 The high priest Hilkiyah (Hilqiyahu) said to Shaphan the scribe,⁹⁷ "I have found the scroll of instruction"⁹⁸ in the house of YHWH."⁹⁹ When Hilkiyah gave the scroll to Shaphan, he read it aloud.¹⁰⁰ 9 Then Shaphan the scribe came to the king,¹⁰¹ and reported the matter¹⁰² to the king, "Your servants have poured out¹⁰³ the silver that was found in the house, and have placed it in the hand of the workers who have oversight of the house of YHWH." 10 Then Shaphan the scribe informed the king, "The priest Hilkiyah has given me a scroll." Shaphan then read it aloud to the king. 11 When the king heard the words of the scroll of instruction, he tore his clothes. 12 Then the king commanded the priest Hilkiyah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Achbor son of Micaiah,¹⁰⁴ Shaphan the scribe, and the king's servant Asaiah, 13 "Go, inquire of YHWH on my behalf, and on behalf of the people, and on behalf of all Judah, concerning the words of this scroll that has been found; for great is the fury of YHWH that burns against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this scroll, to do according to all that is written concerning us." 14 So the priest Hilkiyah went with Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah to the woman-prophet Huldah (Chuldah) the wife of Shallum¹⁰⁵ son of Tikvah son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she was living in Jerusalem in the Mishneh,¹⁰⁶ where they consulted her. 15 She declared to them,¹⁰⁷ "So says YHWH, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me, 16 So says YHWH, I am going to bring calamity on this place and on its inhabitants—all the words of the scroll that the king of Judah has read.¹⁰⁸ 17 Because they have abandoned me and have offered incense to other gods, because they have provoked me to anger with all of their handiwork, therefore, my fury will burn against this place, and it will not be quenched. 18 But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of YHWH, so shall you say to him, So says YHWH, the God of Israel, regarding the words that you have heard: 19 because your heart was tender, and you humbled yourself before YHWH, when you heard what I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before



me, I for my part have heard you, says YHWH. 20 Therefore, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your graves in peace; your eyes shall not see all the calamity that I will bring on this place." They took the oracle back to the king.



2 *Chr* 34:14 While they were bringing out the silver that had been brought into the house of YHWH, the priest Hilkiyah (Hilqiyahu) found the scroll of instruction of YHWH given through Moses. 15 Hilkiyah said to the scribe¹⁰⁹ Shaphan, "I have found the scroll of instruction"¹¹⁰ in the house of YHWH"; and Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan. 16 Shaphan brought the scroll to the king, and further reported to the king, "All that was committed to your servants they are doing. 17 They have poured out¹¹¹ the silver that was found in the house of YHWH and have delivered it into the hand of the overseers and those doing the work." 18 The scribe Shaphan informed the king, "The priest Hilkiyah has given me a scroll." Shaphan then read it aloud to the king. 19 When the king heard the words of the instruction, he tore his clothes. 20 Then the king commanded Hilkiyah, Ahikam son of Shaphan, Abdon son of Micah, the secretary Shaphan, and the king's servant Asaiah: 21 "Go, inquire of YHWH on my behalf, and on behalf of those who are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the scroll that has been found; for the fury of YHWH that is poured out on us is great, because our ancestors did not keep the word of YHWH, to act in accordance with all that is written in this scroll."

22 So Hilkiyah and those whom the king had sent, went to the woman-prophet Huldah (Chuldah) the wife of Shallum son of Tokhath son of Hasrah, keeper of the wardrobe; she was living in Jerusalem in the Mishneh¹¹² and they consulted to her. 23 She declared to them, "So says YHWH, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me, 24 So says YHWH: I will indeed bring calamity upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the curses¹¹³ that are written in the scroll that was read before the king of Judah. 25 Because they have abandoned me and have offered incense to other gods, so that they have provoked me to anger with all the works of their hands,



my fury will be brought to bear on this place and will not be quenched. 26 But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of YHWH, so shall you say to him: So says YHWH, the God of Israel regarding the words that you have heard, 27 because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard his words against this place and its inhabitants, and you have humbled yourself before me, and have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says YHWH. 28 For my part, I will gather you to your ancestors and you shall be gathered to your graves in peace; your eyes shall not see all the calamity that I will bring on this place and its inhabitants." They took the oracle back to the king.



Huldah is the only female prophet whose oracle the Hebrew Bible preserves in the standard "so says YHWH" form. This makes her exceptional for some scholars who use her as leverage to discredit other female prophets and then discount her as a singular aberration.¹¹⁴ She is the prophetic authority behind the reform usually attributed to Josiah. Huldah, who served as the royal prophet of King Josiah of Judah, appears in 2 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 34.¹¹⁵ The most significant difference between the two accounts is the context of the narrative. In 2 Kings 22, Josiah does not purge the land of non-Yahwhistic worship sites until after the Torah scroll has been found. In 2 Chronicles 34, he has already purged the land when the scroll is found (vv. 1-8). So in the Kings account, the word of YHWH through the prophet Huldah is the impetus for reform; in Chronicles, Josiah is credited with initiating the reform on his own. A second, significant difference is the textual variance between Kings and Chronicles on the nature of the discovered scroll. Second Chronicles 34:24 specifies, "So says YHWH: I will indeed bring calamity upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the curses that are written in the scroll that was read before the king of Judah." Those curses are not mentioned in the corresponding Kings passage. The curses seem to refer to Deut 29:10-29, in which those who hear the words of covenant initiation will bring upon themselves (and apparently those not yet born) divine wrath for failing to keep this covenant. Specifically, "all of the curse [*kol-ha'alab*] written in this book" will descend upon the people "for calamity," according to Deut 29:20 (see also v. 27). Both expressions are repeated in the Chricler's



version of the Huldah oracle. (However, the plural, *kol-ha'alot*, is used in 2 Chr 34:24.)¹¹⁶

For simplicity, I will follow the narrative in the order it is presented in Kings and supplement that reading with the additional material from Chronicles. The Huldah oracle as it is preserved and presented in 2 Kgs 22:14-20 is intriguing because of its seemingly singular presentation of the service of a female prophet and because of the nonchalant presentation of that service.¹¹⁷ It is also intriguing because of the role this oracle played in the dramatic and drastic reformation of the cult in Jerusalem and Judah by Josiah. A careful reading of the Kings account will demonstrate that this woman and her prophetic word were instrumental in the forceful presentation of the monotheistic worship of YHWH as the sole legitimate expression of ancient Israelite religion according to the narrative in which it is preserved.

The Huldah oracle occurs prior to the saga of Josiah's reform (23:1-25) and after a series of "regnal résumés"¹¹⁸ (21:1-26). These résumés are followed by an even briefer résumé of Josiah himself (22:1-2) and his initial, and comparatively superficial, attempt at restoration of the temple in Jerusalem (22:3-7). In the context of the initial repair program, restoration is directed toward the temple structure but not its function, that is, the practices of the cult or of the practitioners.¹¹⁹ "The torah scroll" (v. 8) is found and read to the king (22:8-10). Josiah's response is to assemble a delegation commanded to "inquire [*dirshu*] of YHWH" (v. 13), and they go to Huldah the prophet (v. 14).

It is not recorded, but it is reasonable to assume that Jedidah, the queen-mother, guided the minor king Josiah in his personal development. Following the Chrology in Kings, Josiah was eight when he assumed the throne; his father was dead, and no regent is named in the text. His mother would be the closest and most significant adult presence in his life. In several places, the Hebrew Bible documents the positive influence mothers can have on their children.¹²⁰ In addition, there is significant scholarship on the role of the queen-mother in Judah.¹²¹

Josiah is given the highest praise of the Deuteronomistic editor; he is considered to be a true son of David and credited with not turning "to the right or to the left" (presumably from the path of YHWH). It is clear to the Deuteronomistic redactors that his apostate father did not teach the young Josiah fidelity to YHWH.¹²² The ruling high priest, Hilkiah, is later depicted in the narrative as unable to interpret and apply the Torah on his own and is therefore unlikely to be responsible



for the juvenile king's imagined, fierce devotion to YHWH. Shaphan, the royal scribe and secretary, is depicted in the text as failing to recognize the Torah as being from YHWH (22:10).

No account is given of Huldah's introduction to the royal family. She is already established as a trustworthy prophet in the service of the king when she is first presented; she may have been in the service of Jedidah during the young king's early years. She is not simply his first choice; she is his only choice. There is a tradition that she lives and teaches in a place of study. In the MT, Huldah lives in Mishneh or Second Quarter, *bammishneh*.¹²³ Clearly, she came to the attention of someone in the royal household prior to this incident in order that she might be considered for this assignment. It cannot be ascertained whether she came to the attention of the royal family during Josiah's minority under the regency of his mother or during his majority, when he reigned in his own right, but prior contact with the royal family and its administration is virtually certain. There may be an oblique reference to her in 2 Kgs 21:10 and the following, "YHWH said by the prophetic servants¹²⁴ of YHWH, 'Because King Manasseh of Judah has committed these abominations . . .'" If Huldah is indeed one of the prophets who warned Josiah's father, Manasseh, it would make sense for her counsel to be sought not only by the young king but also by those committed to ensuring that the young Josiah did not "walk after the ways of his father." (In 2 Kgs 22:2, Josiah is described positively as walking "after the ways of his father [ancestor] David.")

The consultation of the prophet Huldah as an interpreter of the divine word is built in part on a clear association between inquiry (*d-r-sh*) of YHWH and prophecy (2 Kgs 22:13, 18).¹²⁵ While *d-r-sh* generally means "to ask," "to seek," or "to inquire," it is affected by its context.¹²⁶ The theological use of the root with humanity as its subject and God (or abstract concepts pertaining to the divine-human relationship) as object is the most common.¹²⁷ To inquire of YHWH (or *Elohim*) is regularly, but not exclusively, a prophetic act.¹²⁸ The prophets who are specifically said to inquire of YHWH include Moses, Ahijah, Micajah, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, and Zechariah.¹²⁹ In addition to confirming the authenticity of the scroll, Huldah simultaneously confirms YHWH as the true king of Judah and Josiah as YHWH's designated regent by initially referring to Josiah as "the man" and later as "the king" (vv. 15-16, 18).¹³⁰

Once the book is found, Hilkiyah takes it to Shaphan. Hilkiyah recognizes the book as valid; presumably, he tells Shaphan exactly what



book it is that he has found. Shaphan actually reads the book for himself (v. 8), but incredibly, Shaphan cannot fathom its message and its ramifications for the Judean kingdom. Once more Shaphan reads the book, this time to the king; it is virtually impossible for him not to know what it is that he is reading, particularly as the king dethrones himself and tears his royal robes. It is more likely that Shaphan was waiting for Josiah officially to authenticate the text by royal proclamation.¹³¹ Josiah's dramatic response to the text, particularly when compared to Shaphan's lack of response after two readings and Hilkiyah's willingness to entrust the torah scroll to a bureaucrat, indicates that the king believed this scroll to be the word of YHWH and directly applicable to him and to his people (v. 11). Josiah tore his clothes to indicate immediate and sincere repentance. His secondary response is to assemble the delegation.

The instruction given by Josiah is to seek a prophetic word from YHWH. The oracle is to be sought on behalf of the king personally, "the people," and "all Judah" (v. 13). The latter two populations appear to be identical; the language may be a prose example of descriptive parallelism, rendering an apparent redundancy. (Alternatively, the language may indicate the presence of non-Judean Israelites as recorded in 2 Chr 34:21.) Josiah clearly understands the text to be the authentic word of YHWH; he is convinced that "great is the fury of YHWH . . . because our ancestors did not obey the words of this scroll" (2 Kgs 22:13). Given Josiah's words and previous penitential actions, it is unlikely that he is now looking for mere authentication of the scroll.¹³² Rather, he is looking to ameliorate the curses found in the scroll.¹³³ Josiah is looking for divine intervention through a human agent, whether intercession as some have supposed (Edelman), or expiation (Long), or comfort in the face of an unalterable fate (Bos). Canonically, the oracle serves to explain why Judah would eventually be devastated in spite of the reforms that Josiah initiates and to provide the theological framework for Josiah's reform.

Josiah's carefully composed delegation of Shallum, Ahikam, Achbor, and Asaiah goes to the prophet Huldah to inquire of YHWH (22:14). Josiah sends them, but the text does not indicate that he chose the medium of inquiry. It is possible that the high priest Hilkiyah asserted his cultic/spiritual authority and chose Huldah. It has been suggested that Jeremiah was away at Anathoth and therefore unavailable,¹³⁴ but surely he would have made himself available to his king when the issue at hand was the word of his God. It has also



been suggested that Zephaniah was inactive at the time.¹³⁵ However, there are no textual grounds to support this suggestion, and, again, one would expect that a summons from the king, the high priest, or this uniquely varied delegation would cause any prophet worth his salt to respond with an immediate consultation on the scroll at hand.

It is important to note that the biblical text does not suggest that there was any dispute between Jeremiah and Huldah. Jeremiah was extremely vocal in condemning false prophets. He is Huldah's contemporary and has nothing negative to say about her. He never mentions her by name, I think, because she is not a problem as far as he is concerned. He does make reference several times to all of the legitimate prophets YHWH has sent whom the people have not heeded, but he does not name any of them. He uses the masculine plural *hannevi'im*, which obscures his references to female prophets in general and Huldah in particular.¹³⁶ I believe that he is including female prophets in his construction; there is no reason to imagine that Jeremiah is ignorant or dismissive of the stories of Miriam and Deborah. It is possible that he was aware of more female prophets than have been preserved in the text.

While there is no textual explanation given for the choice of Huldah, it is clear that she is chosen, and preferentially, not as a last resort. The language of the text implies that the service of female prophets was commonplace and required no special introduction or accommodation. In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that "good" kings (at least in the eyes of the Deuteronomist) were associated with personal prophets: David and Nathan; Hezekiah and Isaiah. Huldah's residence in Jerusalem and the acceptance of her service, combined with the language of the text (Josiah's "inquire," *dirshu*, the narrator's "prophet," and Huldah's "so says YHWH"—the technical phrase introducing prophetic speech repeated no less than four times in varying configurations), suggest that she was a professional prophet.¹³⁷

The word of YHWH to Josiah through Huldah was, first of all, a reminder that YHWH and not "the man who sent Hilkiah" was the true king of Judah, also of Israel and all creation. Notice that God is said to be the sovereign of "Israel," not just Judah, in 2 Kgs 22:15: *kob 'amar YHWH elohay yisrael* . . . (so says YHWH the God of Israel). Next, YHWH, through Huldah, confirms that the scroll is authentic. Even though the transgressions were committed by previous generations, the consequences will be experienced in the present, in "this place."¹³⁸ Judah had been entrusted with the jewel of ancient Israelite religion: the



temple in Jerusalem and the rituals to be conducted within it. According to the narrative construction of the Deuteronomist, Judah had also been entrusted with the Torah, which they neglected so badly that they physically lost it. The book in question was presumably the early work of the Deuteronomist. This is evidenced by the Chronicle of Manasseh's sins that precedes this pericope and by the nature of the reforms enacted following it. Specifically, Josiah's covenant ritual (23:1-3), the abolition of worship of anyone other than YHWH (23:4-14), the abolition of the cultic practice of worship of YHWH outside Jerusalem (23:15-20), the reinstatement of the Passover (23:21-23), and the abolition of divination (23:24) all have Deuteronomistic parallels (Deuteronomy 12, 16, 18, 29).

The consequences of the idolatrous abominations were ultimate, because they occurred in the presence of the Divine Name that resided in the temple. For Josiah, the consequences will be mediated; he will die without seeing God's punishment on Judah (22:20). Josiah is apparently a favorite of the Deuteronomists, described as "penitent" and "humble" in 22:19. Having acknowledged the infinitesimal nature of humanity in contrast with the infinite nature of divinity, YHWH now acknowledges the reign of Josiah in Judah. And more than that, YHWH acknowledges the condition of Josiah's heart. He is penitent not just because of his actions, tearing his clothes, but also because of his heart, which led him to improve the condition of the temple and even trust the workers to manage the accounts faithfully (22:7). Even while promising a reprieve to Josiah personally, YHWH emphasizes that Judah will be not just physically destroyed, but also "a desolation" and "a curse" (22:19). Then words of comfort are offered to the king; because Josiah's penitence has moved him to previously undisclosed tears, YHWH is moved to hear Josiah's confession.

What YHWH acknowledges in the heart of Josiah leads to the threefold promise of being gathered to his ancestors, being gathered to his grave in peace, and perhaps most important, not seeing the disaster certain to come to Judah. The first promise is not remarkable; it is surely the expectation of Josiah to be so gathered (Gen 49:29). The second promise contradicts the records of Josiah's death. However, it is important to note that Josiah could in fact have died in peace had he listened to the later oracle of Pharaoh Neco (2 Chr 35:20-22). The ragged wounds inflicted on him by Neco's archers as a result of his disguising himself and reentering a battle that he was told not to fight were anything but "peaceful" (2 Chr 35:20-25; 1 Esd 1:23-31). The final



promise is fulfilled; Josiah dies before the first Babylonian deportation in 597 B.C.E. The delegation takes the oracle in its original entirety back to Josiah from Huldah.

Huldah was a court prophet employed by Josiah's administration, living in Jerusalem; yet her male contemporaries who were not court prophets had significant collections of their oracles preserved. Huldah's case demonstrates both an apparent lack of gender bias on the part of the king and priests who consulted her (including the high priest) and the appearance of bias on the part of the tradition preservers and shapers of the Hebrew Bible who did not conserve her broader 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. She is arguably the first person to grant authoritative status to the Torah scroll deposited in the temple treasury. That scroll is largely understood to have been the heart of the Deuteronomistic corpus. In the subsequent chapter of the Kings version of her narrative, Huldah may be obscured in the company of prophets described in the masculine plural (2 Kgs 23:2). All of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, including the prophets, assemble in the temple for Josiah's reinstatement of the Passover; surely Huldah is there. Only the priests and Levites are present with the people in 2 Chronicles 35.

The last place that Huldah may appear in the biblical text is at the Passover observance that Josiah reinstates in response to her oracle. In 2 Kgs 23:2, the prophets are specified as participants in the event along with the priests and all of the people. In 2 Kgs 23:27, YHWH speaks to Josiah, who has just completed his purge of everything non-Yahwhistic:

YHWH said,

"I will also turn Judah away from my presence as I turned away Israel,
and I will reject this city that I chose, Jerusalem,
and the house of which I said, 'My name shall be there.'"

The medium of YHWH's speech is not disclosed; however, in the Former Prophets, YHWH speaks to monarchs (with the exception of Solomon) through prophets. The only prophet identified as being in the service of Josiah is Huldah. I propose that this address to Josiah in 2 Kgs 23:27 may have been mediated through Huldah.



Was Huldah a cult prophet? Yes. She may have been consulted by the chief cultic officer on a potentially sacred document that, if valid, would change (restore) cultic rituals at the chief cultic site. Her oracle, with its concern for a type of orthodoxy, establishes her as a cult prophet. Huldah was present at the reinstatement of *Pesach* (Passover) with all of the other prophets. Surely she is included in "all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great" (2 Kgs 23:2). The use of the masculine plural *hannevi'im* here indicates that there was at least one male prophet present. This presents a gender reversal of sorts. We do not know who is included in "all the prophets"; but we can presume that Huldah is there. The identity of the anonymous male prophet (or prophets) remains a mystery.

— HANEVIY'AH (THE ANONYMOUS WOMAN-PROPHET) —

Isa 8:1 YHWH said to me, Take for yourself a large tablet¹³⁹ and write on it in¹⁴⁰ ordinary writing, "For Maher Shalal Hash Baz,"¹⁴¹ 2 and have faithful witnesses, the priest Uriah and Zechariah son of Jeberechiah (*Zekaryah ben Yeverekhyahu*) to testify to me. 3 And I went to the Woman Prophet,¹⁴² and she conceived¹⁴³ and gave birth to a son. Then YHWH said to me, Name him Maher Shalal Hash Baz; 4 for before the child knows how to call "My father" or "My mother," the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria¹⁴⁴ will be carried away by the king of Assyria.



The female prophet with whom Isaiah conceives his son Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz is not named in the text (*Isa 8:1-4*), nor is she specifically identified as his woman/wife. The use of the verb *q-r-v*, "to approach," to describe their union suggests strongly that they were married. This verb is used to describe sexually "approaching" one's legal spouse in Deuteronomy, and the Deuteronomist has made several contributions to the Isaianic corpus, including the title *navi'* that Isaiah otherwise avoids.

Interestingly, she is the only prophet mentioned in the entire sixty-six chapters of Isaiah who is not excoriated, excluding Isaiah himself, who is called a prophet only by the narrator. The only action attributed to the anonymous prophet is the conception of a child with Isaiah who