Excerpt

The Prophetic Literature

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Walter Brueggemann has suggested that the prophets were agents of “mediated disruption,” responding to crisis and evoking crisis. Prophets saw what was at stake in the sins and failures of leaders and people all around them, and they responded, calling their hearers back to the purposes of God and practices of holiness. But prophets also catalyzed crisis by their words of impending doom and urgent exhortations for their audiences to see clearly, to understand. Brueggemann is certainly right that the prophets “speak in images and metaphors that aim to disrupt, destabilize, and invite to alternate perceptions of reality.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Hebrew Scriptures represent that the word of the Lord came to dozens of inspired individuals in Israel and Judah over a period of several centuries. Abraham is the ancestor of Israel and, per New Testament traditions, the spiritual ancestor of all who believe (Romans 4). He is portrayed as a Chaldean who migrates to Canaan, the patriarch of what will become a host of countless descendants (Gen 12:1-3). Abraham is a flawed and fearful husband (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-17) and conflicted father (see Genesis 16 and 21) who becomes a powerful chieftain as he obeys the purposes of God. Abraham is also, just once, identified as a prophet who can intercede effectively on behalf of others (Gen 20:7, 17). Moses, a towering figure in the Pentateuch, is portrayed as a bold leader and judge, recipient of God’s Instruction—the Torah—on Mount Sinai, and paradigmatic prophet (see Deut 18:15-22) who intercedes over and over again to save the Israelites from God’s wrath. Thus prophecy is anchored in the founding traditions of Israel as covenant people: fleetingly in the patriarchal stories, and in a much more sustained way in the narratives of Moses leadership, Israel’s escape from slavery in Egypt (the Exodus), and the wilderness wanderings of Israel on the long journey to Canaan. The biblical books of Samuel and Kings are rich with stories about prophets named and unnamed. Some are famous—who could forget the prophet Nathan’s dramatic entrapment of David for his malfeasance in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah? (“You are the man!”—see 2 Samuel 11–12.) Others are more obscure, such as the unnamed “man of God” who prophesied against Jeroboam and the “old prophet” in Bethel who in turn delivers a divine word of judgment against that man of God (1 Kings 13).[[2]](#footnote-2) False prophecy was a serious problem, in the eyes of the scribes who shaped the biblical traditions. Not every means of intermediation was considered legitimate (see Deut 13:1-5), and not everyone who claimed to be speaking a word of Yhwh was authentic (see Deut 18:20-22 and Jeremiah 28, among numerous biblical passages concerned about false prophecy).

Women and men served as prophets in ancient Israel and Judah. There may have been prophets of other genders too; the Hebrew Scriptures do not speak clearly about intersex or genderqueer bodies, hence that aspect of gender history may be lost to us, though we may note with interest the role of the Ethiopian eunuch Ebed-melech in Jeremiah and at gender roles and conceptions of the body more broadly across the ancient Near East. This volume focuses on the written traditions of the Latter Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets, all of whom were male, so far as we can guess at how they lived their gender identity. But for the sake of comprehensiveness, you may wish to consider the four named women prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures—Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Noadiah—and explore how they have been figured in reception history

* Miriam, the sister of Moses, plays an instrumental role in the survival of baby Moses after his mother puts him into the river in his basket of bulrushes (Exod 2:1-10). She is not mentioned in the Hebrew genealogical text of Exod 6:20, but the Septuagint (LXX) includes her name there; see also Num 26:59 and 1 Chr 6:3. After the Israelites have passed through the miraculously divided Red Sea and the Lord has caused the waters to drown the pursuing Egyptian soldiers, Miriam leads the Israelite women in a song of triumph: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (Exod 15:20-21). During Israel’s wilderness wanderings, Miriam and Aaron argue with Moses, asserting their own legitimacy as prophets; Miriam alone experiences divine punishment as a result of this conflict (see Numbers 12). Her death is recorded (Num 20:1), something that underlines her stature in Israel’s sacred traditions. Miriam is remembered in Deut 24:9 and Mic 6:4.
* Deborah, one of the many charismatic warrior-judges whose exploits are recounted in the book of Judges, is identified as a prophet in Judg 4:4. She plays a vital role as military tactician in Israel’s defeat of the Canaanite forces of Jabin and his commander, Sisera. Deborah is featured as singer of an epic song of victory that celebrates her role (Judges 5). It has long been noticed that the book of Judges pays close attention to the power and discernment of women (Deborah, Jael, the mother of Samson, Delilah) as well as their vulnerability in the closing chapters of the book (the Levite’s concubine, the virgins of Jabesh-gilead, the women dancing at Shiloh). Deborah’s role as prophet shows that heeding the Lord does result in victory for Israel, an important signal near the beginning of this book that chronicles Israel’s inexorable spiraling into terrible moral chaos.
* Huldah, a prophet during the reign of Josiah of Judah, serves as the catalyst for the religious reforms undertaken by Josiah. When “the book of the law”—usually considered by scholars to be some form of Deuteronomy—is discovered in the Jerusalem temple, its teachings having been ignored for generations, a stricken Josiah sends officials to consult Huldah. Her oracular response, introduced formally with “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel,” indicts Judah for idolatry and offers an ironic word of comfort to Josiah: his penitence has won him a reprieve from having to see the destruction of Jerusalem. Josiah will die (assassinated during negotiations rather than killed on the battlefield, thus ironically dying “in peace”) in 609 bce, long before the Babylonian onslaught that ends in the fall of Jerusalem in 586. The king’s response to Huldah’s prophesying is to make a vow of fidelity to the Lord with the people of Judah (2 Kgs 23:3) and to purge Judah of the shrines, personnel, and practices that had supported worship of gods other than Yhwh (2 Kgs 23:4-25). Consider that Deuteronomistic editors shaped many texts in the Hebrew Scriptures in light of their goals and ideology. Now: Huldah is the prophet who affirms the rightness of the Deuteronomistic reform and predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. So she is not just some obscure intermediary. Perhaps we should imagine her as closer to a second Moses: a towering prophetic figure who serves to authorize all of the Deuteronomistic writing and amplifying of ancient Israel’s sacred texts! Yet in decades of weekly church attendance, not once have I heard Huldah mentioned in a sermon or prayer. Perhaps your experience is different, but I’m guessing that for many communities of faith over many generations, Huldah is not a household name—and she should be.
* Noadiah is mentioned among the prophets who oppose the initiative led by Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 6:14). Local antagonism to Nehemiah’s efforts constitutes a major theme in the so-called “Nehemiah memoir” in Ezra–Nehemiah, a single unified book in antiquity. The identification of Noadiah by name should be taken as a signal of her significance in the ranks of named adversaries, along with Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, Geshem the Arab, and Shemaiah son of Delaiah.

Wilda Gafney has written about the named female prophets in the Hebrew Bible and female prophets who are unnamed, such as the women excoriated as false prophets and duplicitous diviners in Ezek 13:17-23. Gafney’s 2008 book, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel*, is in the *For Further Reading* list at the end of this chapter. Midrashic and Talmudic traditions honor as prophets not only Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, but also four other women in the Hebrew Bible: Sarah, Hannah, Abigail, and Esther.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Modern scholarship on the biblical prophets is situated within a comparative ancient Near Eastern historical framework. When scholars consider the roles of ancient prophets, scholars have oriented their research toward uncovering historical data about ancient kings, the wars they fought, the monumental buildings they constructed, the politics of the royal palace, and the official religious practices that were promulgated in their temples. The study of ancient Israelite prophecy has been enriched in recent years by nuanced literary approaches to the texts, as well as sustained engagement with insights and methodologies of other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Cultural anthropology, ritual studies, trauma studies, gender studies, and postcolonial criticism all have enhanced our understanding of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Scriptures.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (2012), 625. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The English translation used throughout this volume is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), unless otherwise noted. Where the Hebrew versification differs from that of English translations, citations will follow the numeration in the NRSV. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Detailing thought about the prophets in centuries of rabbinic interpretation and in contemporary Judaism is beyond the scope of this volume. The interested reader may wish to consult the following works and their bibliographies: Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (based on the 1949 translation by Carlyle Witton-Davies, with a new introduction by Jon D. Levenson; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (orig. pub. New York: Harper & Row, 1962, now in a Perennial Classics edition with introduction by Susannah Heschel, 2001); Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Philosophy 8; Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001); Kepnes, *Future of Jewish Theology*, esp. Chapter 6, “Prophetic Holiness”; Marvin H. Sweeney, “Contemporary Jewish Readings of the Prophets,” pp. 447-66 in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets* (ed. Carolyn J. Sharp; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)