

The Agency of Female Prophets in the Bible

Independent or Instrumental? Prophetic or Political?

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Women as prophets

Prophecy was one of the very few professional roles in the ancient world that was not gender-specific. The ancient Near Eastern sources provide an ample evidence of both male and non-male prophets, giving the impression that gender did not really matter if a person was acknowledged as a prophet, that is, a speaker of divine messages to human addressees. The cuneiform sources know a significant number of women and other non-male persons acting as mouthpieces of the divine. In the seventh-century BCE Assyria it seems that only the minority of prophets were of male gender, and even at Mari a millennium earlier in the seventeenth century BCE, a significant portion of prophets known to us were women or belonged to the class of *assinnu*, that is, persons with an unconventional gender role. In the most significant Greek oracle sites, such as the temples of Apollo at Delphi and Didyma, and that of Zeus at Dodona, the inspired speakers were women; of the major oracles, only Claros employed male persons as deliverers of Apollo's words.¹

Gender-inclusiveness was not typical of all divination. In Mesopotamia, the divinatory roles that involved highly developed literacy and studies in omen literature, especially astrology and extispicy, were reserved for male persons. The evidence for women in scholarly professions is scanty at the best, and disappears altogether towards the first millennium BCE.² In the Greek world, there is evidence of female seers practicing some kind of technical divination, but even there, the female involvement in divination is not very common outside the major oracle sites just mentioned.³ The gendered image of Greek and Mesopotamian divination is, therefore, twofold: inductive/technical divination generally belongs to men, while intuitive/inspired divination can be practiced by male and non-male persons alike. This general picture, without presenting an all-pervasive and absolute divide, may serve as the starting point when we start discussing the agency of female prophets in the Bible.

¹ A full taxonomy of the gender of prophets in the ancient Near East and in Greece can be found in Nissinen, 2017: 297–304; for the *assinnu*, see Peled, 2016; Svärd / Nissinen, 2018; for female prophets in the ancient Near East, see also Stöckl, 2010, and in Greece, Flower, 2008: 211–39; Lampinen, 2013.

² See May, 2018.

³ See Flower, 2008: 121–215.

In the Hebrew Bible, the image of divination is dominated by prophecy, which is the prioritized way of becoming conversant with divine knowledge. Many other forms of divination are forbidden and condemned altogether, and legitimized forms of inductive divination are much less sophisticated than the main Mesopotamian divinatory techniques. Women can be found as practitioners of both legitimate and non-accepted divination,⁴ but the gender balance of biblical prophets is heavily male-dominated: ca. fifty male persons carry the title *nābī'* “prophet,” but only five women are called *nēbī'ā* “female prophet,” namely Miriam (Exod 15:20); Deborah (Judg 4:4); Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14–20); Noadiah (Neh 6:14), and an anonymous female prophet in Isa 8:3. In addition, the activity of a group of anonymous women is once characterized as “prophesying” (*hitnabbē'*) in Ezek 13:17–23.⁵ To these should be added another female prophet who is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible but who belongs to its literary aftermath, that is, Anna, who is there when Jesus is presented at the temple of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36–38). Anna is the one and only female prophet in the New Testament who has been given a proper name and who carries the title *προφῆτις*.⁶

That only some ten percent of biblical prophets are women does not necessarily give an accurate picture of the gender-balance of prophets in the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah or the Persian province of Yehud. That the prophets of the male god Yahweh were predominantly male is a distinct possibility, given that the sparse documentation of prophecy in the Levantine / West Semitic world knows otherwise only male prophets of male deities.⁷ In any case, everything we know about the prophetic phenomenon in Southern Levant in the Roman times and earlier comes to us through a scribal filter and is indicative of the preferences of the authors and editors of the texts that were to form the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

Even the few female characters designated as prophets should be discussed as narrative figures in the first place, not trying to draw all too many historical conclusions regarding the position of female prophets in Israel, Judah, Yehud, or Judea. The agency of the female prophets is, therefore, to be understood as a literary construct created by the scribes for their audiences. Some of the characters may

⁴ For women’s divination in the Hebrew Bible, see Hamori, 2015.

⁵ General studies in the female prophets in the Hebrew Bible include Fischer, 2002; Gafney, 2008; Williamson, 2010; Brenner-Idan, 2015: 58–67; Hamori, 2015; Lee, 2019; Nissinen, 2019b (Engl. 2019a: 127–52).

⁶ In addition, Philip’s four anonymous daughters are said to prophesy in Acts 21:9, and the self-proclaimed *προφῆτις* of Rev 2:20 is given the nickname Jezebel.

⁷ Cf. Stökl, 2009. The Levantine / West Semitic documentation of prophecy consists of a small number of texts: the plaster texts from Deir Alla (El); the Zakkur stela (Baalshamayin); the Amman Citadel Inscription (Milcom), and two or three letters from Lachish (SBLWAW 41, nos. 136–141).

carry historical reminiscences of the socio-political impact of women acting as prophets, while others are purely legendary.

Agencies of the prophets

With “agency” I refer to the capacity of a person to act and function within a social environment.⁸ There are different types of agency corresponding to the status and roles of the individual within the community. In this essay, I pay attention to the *religious agency*, that is, claiming and enacting of an actively assumed role within a religious context.⁹ Religious agency has different subcategories depending on the religious function of a person. *Divinatory agency* presupposes that there is a community acknowledging the possibility of communication between the human and superhuman realms, as well as persons who are acknowledged as having the capacity and skills for successful divine-human communication. *Prophetic agency* is the type of divinatory agency that involves intuitive communication with the divine, that is, acquisition of divine knowledge without inductive interpretation of observable objects.¹⁰ Another type of religious agency is *magical agency*, which differs from divinatory agency in so far as its purpose is not primarily to acquire superhuman knowledge but to bring about change by ritual means in collaboration with superhuman agents.¹¹ Magical agency typically conflates with *ritual agency*, which is a multifaceted subcategory of religious agency, involving engagement with any kind of ritual practices.

Anyone having a religious agency within a community normally assumes multiple agencies less defined by religion, such as political, military, administrative, etc., depending on the person’s social status and occupation. Therefore, even prophetic agency is not necessarily the principal agency of a person but is more or less combined with other agencies. The subtypes of religious agency – prophetic, magical, and ritual – are not mutually exclusive but coincide in different combinations.

Prophetic agency, perhaps even to a greater extent than many other religious agencies, can be either independent or instrumental, or both in different proportions. With *instrumental agency* I mean the idea of the prophet as a passive intermediary of the divine word, the deity being understood as the actual agent while the subjectivity of the human intermediary is silenced. *Independent agency*, on

⁸ The following analysis of agency is based on my earlier work on the gendered prophetic agency in Nissinen, 2017: 304–314; cf. also Svård / Halton, 2018: 25–30.

⁹ Cf. Leming, 2007.

¹⁰ For this definition of prophecy, see Weippert, 2014: 231–232; Stökl, 2012: 7–11; Nissinen, 2017: 19–23.

¹¹ I have recently discussed the differences and interfaces of divination and magic (e.g., Nissinen, 2019c; 2020a; 2020b), dismantling the alleged difference of magic and religion but distinguishing between the categories of magic and divination which nevertheless may overlap. Cf. also Hamori, 2015: 20–26; Schmitt, 2004, 90–93.

the other hand, lays more accent on the subjective capacity of decision-making of the human agent.¹² Whether a prophet's agency is to be seen as instrumental or independent is very much a matter of cultural interpretation of agency; what seems to us quite independent action in an ancient narrative may have been interpreted as instrumental by the ancient readers.

In what follows I will investigate individually each of the six female biblical prophetic characters and the one anonymous group. Again, it is necessary to remind that all these women are primarily narrative characters and, as such, literary constructs of their authors. Therefore, the agencies of these prophetic women should not be taken as a reliable description of what female prophets actually did in ancient times but, rather, what kind of action could be imagined to have taken place in the authors' and the readers' past.

Miriam

Miriam is the most often mentioned female prophet in the Hebrew Bible, and the only one appearing in more than one context.¹³ She is introduced in Exod 15:20, immediately after the Israelites have walked on dry ground through the Sea and the waters have returned to destroy the entire Egyptian army. Having experienced this miraculous act of God, Moses sings a song together with the Israelites, beginning with the words "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exod 15:1). This song of praise lasts for eighteen verses, after which the Hebrew text repeats the Israelites' walking on dry ground and the Egyptians' destruction, saying: "Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea'" (Exod 15:21–21).

Miriam's song does not continue any further in the Masoretic Text. The repetition can be explained in various ways. The song could be understood as an antiphony between Moses and Miriam, whose response is only represented by the first lines, or, rather, that Miriam's song is secondarily re-attributed to Moses to lend to it more authority.¹⁴ The fluidity of the textual tradition can be seen in the Reworked Pentateuch presenting (and preserving?) fragments of a longer version of Miriam's song (4Q365 6 II 1–7).¹⁵ In any case, the crucial verse repeated almost verbatim in verses 1 and 21¹⁶ is now ascribed first to Moses and after him to

¹² For independent and instrumental agencies, see Hovi, 2011.

¹³ On Miriam, see, e.g., Kessler, 2001; Fischer, 2002: 64–94; Rapp, 2002; Ackerman, 2002; Gafney, 2008: 76–85; Tervanotko, 2013; Brenner-Idan, 2015: 62–63; Hamori, 2015: 61–81.

¹⁴ Thus Freedman, 1999: 70–71; for the primacy of Miriam's song, see also Janzen, 1992.

¹⁵ See White, 1992: 222–224.

¹⁶ The only difference in the Masoretic Text is the form of the verb "to sing": *'āšîrâ* (15:1;

Miriam. Therefore, in the present composition, Miriam comes second only to Moses – but in any case, *second* to Moses.

The one-verse piece of narrative describing Miriam ascribes her several roles. She is introduced as the sister of Aaron, thus providing her with a high social standing and integrating her into the leadership structure. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are mentioned together even in Mic 6:4, where God says to have sent them before the people when redeeming them from the slavery in Egypt. Indicative of Miriam's self-evident role as a member of a leading family is also the report on her death and burial (Num 20:1) and her position in the genealogy of the Levites in Num 26:59 (cf. 1 Chron 5:29).

In Exod 15:20–21, Miriam takes the initiative after the miracle, introducing a ritual involving music and dance. She leads the band of women who play the drum and dance in praise of God. The music and dance initiated by Miriam give a response to the miraculous act of God by the people who have just been saved from the disaster. Miriam, hence, assumes a ritual agency that she practices from a leadership position, at least in relation to other women participating in the worship.

The ritual initiative makes Miriam's agency both independent and religious – but what about her prophetic agency? She carries the title *nēbī'ā*, and even if nothing is said about her transmitting divine words, it cannot be coincidental that such a rare title is given to her. Perhaps there is one expression indicating her role as an intermediary between God and the people, i.e., *'ānā lāhem* to be found behind the translation “sang to them” (15:21). The verb *'ānā* actually does not mean “to sing” but “to answer,” and in this case may refer Miriam's response to God *on behalf* of the people, not *to* them.¹⁷ Even according to this interpretation, Miriam does not act as God's mouthpiece, but she communicates with him anyway, combining the prophetic and ritual agencies.

A more distinctly prophetic agency of Miriam is discussed in Numbers 12, a story which is essentially about prophetic authority. This narrative tells about an open conflict between Moses and Miriam, supported by her brother Aaron. Miriam and Aaron express their disapproval of the marriage of Moses with a Cushite woman and come to him asking: “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (12:2). This question clearly marks Miriam's and Aaron's prophetic agency, since the expression *dibber bē-* means exactly God's speaking through them. At the same time, however, this agency is called into question – not by Moses who is described as being “very humble” (12:3), but by God himself. God says: “When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my

cohortative sg. 1.) vs. *šīrū* (15:21; imperative pl. 3.); note that both the Septuagint (Ἀισωμεν), the Peshitta (*nšbh/šbhyn*) and the Vulgate (*cantemus*) read a first person plural form in both verses.

¹⁷ Cf. Fischer, 2002: 66–67.

servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord” (12:6–8). The prophetic agency of Miriam and Aaron is not denied altogether, since they could be included among the prophets to whom God speaks in dreams and visions. Moses, however, forms a category of his own. He is more than an average prophet, since he talks with God face to face (cf. Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10). Miriam (but not Aaron) is first punished with leprosy because of her rebellion, but finally only becomes shut out of the camp for seven days.

In Numbers 12, Miriam’s social, ritual, and theological positioning differs drastically from Exod 15. Miriam is humiliated, becoming (ritually) excommunicated for a period of seven days as if she was impure and thus excluded from any ritual performance (cf. Lev 13:46; Num 5:2). Her prophetic agency is decidedly independent in Numbers 12, and this is precisely the reason why her leadership is disputed if not ridiculed.¹⁸ If the contradictory and conflicted presentation of Miriam’s agency goes back to controversies of the Second Temple period, as many scholars have assumed with good grounds,¹⁹ then Miriam’s agency as a narrative character is also political, as it is a part of the once-political agenda of the text itself.

Deborah

With Deborah, we enter into an entirely different divinatory landscape with a woman who presides over a variety of functions, and whose authority is not called into question by anyone. Deborah is introduced in the narrative of Judges 4 concerning a war between the Canaanites and the Israelite tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun.²⁰ She also plays a role in the subsequent poem, the so-called “Song of Deborah,” in Judges 5. She is introduced not only as *’iššā nēbī’ā*, “prophet woman,” but also as *’ēšet lappidôt*. This compound, often translated as “the wife of Lappidoth,” may be a pun that allows multiple interpretations such as “woman of torches / fiery woman,” or, supposing an intended metathesis of the Hebrew consonants (*l-p-d < d-l-p*), even a reference to the Delphic oracle.²¹ Even the name Deborah may be taken as a pun, since the consonants *d-b-r* refer to the Hebrew verb *dibber* denoting speaking, and the word itself means a “honey-bee”.²² Both interpretations hint at the prophetic role of Deborah, not only speaking but even

¹⁸ According to Tervanotko, 2013: 167, “it is no coincidence that Miriam initiates the discussion concerning prophecy and that God addresses her about this matter. In doing so, her own relationship with God is dealt with.”

¹⁹ See Kessler, 2001; Rapp, 2002: 178–193.

²⁰ On Deborah, see Fischer, 2002: 190–230; Gafney, 2008: 85–93; Williamson, 2010: 72–74; Brenner-Idan, 2015: 63–66; Hamori, 2015: 82–93; Lee, 2019: 118–125.

²¹ Thus Kupitz / Berthelot, 2009: 114–117.

²² For the puns, see Spronk, 2001: 239–240.

bees, associated with female prophecy in the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*.²³ All these puns make sense with regard to Deborah's agencies, which are multiple indeed.

The first thing that is told about Deborah is that she "used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment" (Judg 4:4). This highlights Deborah's position as one of the judges who led the people of Israel before the establishment of the monarchy. Nothing more is told about her judicial activity, and it is worth asking if it refers to any kind of administration of justice, or whether the verb *šāpaṭ* rather refers to the function of a diviner visited by people to receive divine judgment.²⁴ The palm tree can be associated with a holy tree representing the divine presence. As oracular activity, Deborah's "judging" is also comparable to the prophesying of the Delphic Pythia sitting on her tripod.²⁵

Deborah's activity has even other decidedly divinatory elements. She delivers the word of Yahweh to Barak, calling him to be the commander of the Israelite troops and promising victory (4:6–7), and she uses phraseology typical of ancient Near Eastern war oracles: "Up! For this is the day on which the Lord has given Sisera²⁶ into your hand. The Lord is indeed going out before you" (4:14). She even demonstrates clairvoyance in predicting that Barak will not be glorified, because "the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman" (4:9) – not referring to herself but to Jael who was to kill Sisera with a tent peg (4:21).

All this indicates Deborah's divinatory agency, which includes even a prophetic aspect. Her prophetic role is not indicated by the title *nēbī'ā* alone;²⁷ she pronounces a war oracle, and her prophetic role is acted out even ritually in singing. As in the case of Miriam, Deborah, together with Barak, sings a song of praise after the defeat of enemy forces, and in the song itself, Deborah is urged to "speak" (*dibber*) a song (5:12). This conveys the idea of music as inspired speech. When it comes to proclaiming divine words, her agency may be seen as instrumental, but at the same time, her narrative roles emphasize her independent action and initiative in liberating the Israelites from the Canaanite oppression.

Deborah's functions are not restricted to divinatory activities, since she assumes a very active role in the war; indeed, the victory over the Canaanites rests

²³ West, 2003.

²⁴ The use of *šāpaṭ* can be compared to the Ugaritic necromantic text *KTU* 1.124, in which the word *mṭpṭ* stands for an oracle. For this text, see Dietrich / Loretz, 1990: 205–240 and their conclusion (*ibid.*, 238): "So dürfte das *mšpṭ* der Deborah (Ri 4,5) auf ihre Tätigkeit als Orakelpriesterin unter einem Baum hindeuten." Cf. also Spronk, 2001: 235–237.

²⁵ Cf. Kupitz / Berthelot, 2009.

²⁶ Sisera is the commander of the Canaanite troops.

²⁷ The title and, consequently, the prophetic role of Deborah has been regarded as secondary; see, e.g., Spronk, 2001: 242.

essentially on the independent action of two powerful women, Deborah and Jael.²⁸ Deborah not only intermediates Yahweh's oracles to Barak, but even goes up to the battle with him and his ten thousand warriors (4:10), delivering the above-quoted oracle of victory before the decisive attack of the Israelites (4:14). The Song of Deborah calls her "the Mother in Israel" (5:7), and the tribes of Israel are said to have joined Deborah (5:15), as if she was in command of the army. This gives Deborah quite a strong military agency, which is clearly dependent on her divinatory agency as God's messenger but does not turn her agency into instrumental but quite independent.²⁹ Deborah's leadership has been rightly likened to that of Moses,³⁰ with whom Deborah (unlike Miriam) is not explicitly compared in the biblical text. With respect to her multiple agencies, including the divinatory, military, ritual, and perhaps even judicial aspects, and to her unquestioned leadership, Deborah is by far the most powerful woman among the female prophets in the biblical narrative.

Huldah

While acknowledging Deborah's merits as the mightiest female prophet in the Bible, we should not play down the religio-political significance of Huldah, the last prophet mentioned in Joshua–Kings, Deborah being the first.³¹ Huldah plays an important role in the narrative about the "Scroll of Law" (*sēper hat-tôrâ*) found during restoration works in the temple of Jerusalem and read aloud to King Josiah (2 Kings 22; 2 Chronicles 34). This scroll is usually identified with the book of Deuteronomy or an idealized form of it; in any case, in the version of Kings (unlike that of the Chronicles³²), Huldah's oracle initiates the cultic reform Josiah executed in the kingdom of Judah, and thus has occupied a prominent position in the "history of Israelite religion," however historical the event itself can be considered.³³

Huldah, like Deborah, has an animal name (*huldâ*) which can be understood as "mole" or, as in Talmud, "weasel."³⁴ The name may carry connotations related

²⁸ See Brison, 2013.

²⁹ See Eder, 2009: 123–124.

³⁰ See, e.g., Hamori, 2015: 88–89.

³¹ On Huldah, see Handy, 1994; Weems, 2003; Fischer, 2002: 158–188; Gafney, 2008: 94–103; Williamson, 2010: 68–72; Ilan, 2010; Brenner-Idan, 2015: 60–61; Hamori, 2015: 148–59; Scheuer, 2015; Stavropoulou, 2018.

³² In Chronicles, Huldah "is 'replaced' by Jeremiah at the end of the book, since the destruction of Jerusalem is presented as the fulfillment of oracles that YHWH put in the mouth of Jeremiah (2 Chr 36:21)" (Römer, 2016: 521).

³³ The historicity of Josiah's cultic reform has been both defended (e.g., Albertz, 2005) and refuted (e.g., Pakkala, 2010); either way, the historicity of the prophet Huldah remains an open question.

³⁴ Huldah the weasel is discussed in *bMeg* 14b; cf. *ḥoled*, one of the unclean animals listed in Lev 11:29.

to Huldah's agency. Both the blindness of the mole and the shrewdness of the weasel have been suggested as characterizing Huldah, either as a "blind prophet" only listening to the words of the scroll³⁵ or as a "cunning career woman."³⁶ Huldah is introduced through her husband³⁷ Shallum, keeper of the wardrobe, who lived in the new quarter of Jerusalem. The familial and spatial location of Huldah reveals certain ambivalence in her relation to the temple of Jerusalem, since it may be understood to indicate either Huldah's proximity to or her distance from the temple. If Shallum was in charge of temple vestments, Huldah is linked with the temple through her husband without being directly affiliated with it. In any case, the delegation sent to her by King Josiah consists of a priest, a scribe, and royal officials and, therefore, represents the political and religious high command of the kingdom of Judah. The narrative wants the reader to understand that this female prophet (*nēbī'ā*) is trusted by the temple and the court as an accredited intermediate of divine knowledge. Her indirect link with the temple is probably highlighted to distance her from the personnel of the temple who were to be displaced because of their wrong maintenance of the worship. All this provides Huldah's with a distinctly religio-political agency.³⁸

The only thing that is told about Huldah's action is that the king's delegation went to her, presumably to her domicile, to consult her, and that she spoke to them divine words beginning with the *Botenformel* (messenger formula): "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus says the Lord, I will indeed bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants – all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read ... (etc.)" (2 Kgs 22:15). Huldah's agency is not only presented as a decidedly prophetic one, but also depicted in a quite instrumental and impersonal manner. She does nothing but transmits the divine word, has no interpretation to add to it, and does not act in any way that would highlight her personal initiative. What she says is for the first part "a patchwork from expressions the occur in the book of Jeremiah,"³⁹ and even otherwise, being embedded in the narrative of Joshua–Kings, permeates with Deuteronomistic language.⁴⁰ The whole story can be seen as fulfilling the ideals about a king consulting and observing the Torah (Deut 17:18–20), which is mediated by a prophet like Moses raised up by God (Deut 18:15–22). Hence, at least indirectly, Huldah is presented as a follower of Moses himself.⁴¹ However, her prophetic agency is

³⁵ Thus Römer, 2013.

³⁶ Thus Scheuer, 2015: 113–123.

³⁷ In the Greek text of Codex Vaticanus, Huldah appears as Shallum's mother.

³⁸ That is, on a narrative level. In my view, the text does not give enough evidence of a historical character having been either a prophet of Asherah (thus Edelman, 1994) or a proponent of the Deuteronomistic movement (thus Ilan, 2010).

³⁹ Römer, 2016: 521; cf. *idem.*, 2013.

⁴⁰ See Weems, 2003; Ilan, 2010.

⁴¹ See Fischer, 2002: 182–185.

subordinate to the divine agency represented by the scroll. This, again, connects Huldah with the agency of the scribes as transmitters of the divine word.

The scribes who authored the narrative do not feature Huldah as anything but the mouthpiece of God, presenting her agency as instrumental rather than independent. A dash of independence in Huldah's agency may, however, be heard in her "cunningness" suggested by her name and visible in her "ambiguous and agreeable"⁴² oracle to the king in proclaiming the destruction of Jerusalem while promising that the king will not need to see it with his own eyes: "I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place" (2 Kgs 22:20//2 Chr 34:28). As the story continues, it becomes clear that Josiah was killed by Pharaoh Necho at Megiddo but, later on, his remains were indeed gathered and buried in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23:29–30//2 Chr 35:20–24). Thus, contrary to the widespread opinion, Huldah's oracle did, indeed, come true: Josiah was buried in his own tomb and never had to witness the destruction of Jerusalem.⁴³

Huldah's activity is not set in the temple, neither does she perform a ritual in the place where the king's delegation come to consult her. While Huldah, thus, is not given an independent ritual agency, her activity is embedded within a larger ritual context. The act of reading the scroll that caused the king to rend his garment, the king's request for an oracle about the scroll, and the prophecy delivered by Huldah can be seen as a sequence of ritual responses to the scroll itself.⁴⁴ Even the burial of Josiah after his death can be seen as concluding the ritual sequence of which Huldah's oracle form an essential part. Huldah, hence, is provided with a ritual agency, however indirect and instrumental.

Another indicator of Huldah's indirect ritual agency is her location which distances her spatially from the temple but associates her with it through her husband Shallum. He is presented as the keeper of the wardrobe, that is, the curator of vestments who would have had to do with the king's garments as well – presumably both the one he rent and the one in which he was wrapped for his burial.⁴⁵ This is probably the reason why Shallum is mentioned: not primarily to identify the female prophet through her husband but to provide her with an institutional and material link to "the material objects, ritual actions, and very bodiliness of the Jerusalem temple cult itself."⁴⁶

⁴² Scheuer, 2015: 121.

⁴³ Stavrakopoulou, 2018: 287–288.

⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, 283.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 289–290.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

Noadiah

The fourth female prophet carrying a personal name is Noadiah who is mentioned once in the book of Nehemiah.⁴⁷ Nehemiah was the official of the Persian king who came to Jerusalem to organize the restoration of the walls of the city. As the implied author of his “memoire,” he reports the manifold hardships in fulfilling this task and the enduring opposition of the local elites against it. Among his opponents are not only his archenemies Tobiah and Sanballat but even prophets: “Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid” (Neh 6:14). The perspective is entirely that of the omniscient narrator who speaks in Nehemiah’s voice and constructs the political scenery in Jerusalem in his time,⁴⁸ including the cooption and refusal of prophets.⁴⁹

The mention of prophets is noteworthy for several reasons. First, the book of Ezra-Nehemiah does not otherwise mention any other contemporary prophets, only the prophets of the past.⁵⁰ Second, Nehemiah tells a little earlier that he had been accused in an anonymous letter of putting up prophets to proclaim him king of Jerusalem (6:7). He also tells about the false prophecy (*nēbû ’ā*) of Shemaiah son of Delaiah, who had asked him to hide away in the temple lest he might be killed (6:10–13). Nehemiah denies all this as pure intimidation and denigration. Third, the text suggests there were several prophets in Jerusalem who were against Nehemiah, and since Noadiah’s name is specifically mentioned, she seems to assume a leading role among those prophets.

The text gives the impression that there were still (or: again) prophets in Jerusalem after the destruction of the city and the temple one-and-half a century earlier, perhaps a group continuing the old prophetic tradition. For some reason, this group found itself in opposition to the religio-political authority represented by Nehemiah and felt itself threatened by his activity.⁵¹ These prophets – if not *all* prophets⁵² – sided with the people who were not happy with Nehemiah’s undertakings.

⁴⁷ On Noadiah, see Carroll, 1992; Fischer, 2002: 255–273; Nissinen, 2006: 30–35 (= 2019: 577–595); Gafney, 2008: 111–14; Williamson, 2010: 65–67; Brenner-Idan, 2015: 61–62; Hamori, 2015: 186–188. Note that in the Septuagint, Noadiah appears as a male person (2 Esdr 16:14: τῷ Νοαδία τῷ προφήτῃ).

⁴⁸ This is demonstrated by Clines, 1990, with just warnings against taking the narrative at face value for the purposes of history-writing.

⁴⁹ Cf. Carroll, 1992: 90.

⁵⁰ I.e., Haggai and Zechariah in Ezra 5:1–2; 6:14 and anonymous prophets in Ezra 9:11; Neh 9:26, 30, 32. On prophets in Ezra–Nehemiah, see Grabbe, 2018.

⁵¹ Miriam’s opposition to Moses in Numbers 12 has been interpreted along similar lines; cf. Carroll, 1992: 94–95; Kessler, 2001; Rapp, 2002: 178–193; Fischer, 2002: 266–271.

⁵² As Carroll, 1992: 88 points out, Haggai and Zechariah, that is, figures of the past, are the only prophets who stand for what the writers of Ezra–Nehemiah stood for.

Noadiah's agency appears as emphatically independent and political in the brief note in Neh 6:14. She is not introduced as having any kind of divinatory function, but is only presented as an opponent of Nehemiah and his policy, together with "the rest of the prophets," who had been "intimidating" him (*mēyārē'im*). The same verb is used of the anonymous senders of the letter accusing Nehemiah of putting up prophets for himself; perhaps Noadiah and her colleagues are implicitly presented as its senders. Such prophets would have executed a well-known prophetic function of king-making, whereas Noadiah and the other prophets appear primarily political actors with an agenda similar to the other opponents of Nehemiah. Therefore, Noadiah's agency is bound up with the conflict among the servants of the Persian empire, reflecting the prophets' potential of bolstering political stances – something that may have been reality in the narrator's world.⁵³

The female prophet in Isaiah 8

In the book of Isaiah, we encounter an anonymous female prophet, of whom only the following words are said: "I went to the female prophet (*han-nēbi'ā*), and she conceived and bore a son" (Isa 8:3). The speaker is the prophet Isaiah who is told by God to take a tablet and write on it the name Maher-shalal-hash-baz, "Pillage Hastens, Looting Speeds." Isaiah does what God tells him to do in the presence of two named witnesses, and the ominous name written on the tablet is then given to the son to whom the female prophet gives birth.⁵⁴ The name of the child is presented as a sign of Samaria and Damascus becoming subjugated by Assyria.

The mother of the child is anonymous but her designation bears a definite article. The woman is often called Isaiah's wife, but this is not how she is introduced in the text. What matters more than the marital configuration is that the anonymous woman who gives birth to the child with the God-given ominous name is actually called a prophet in the narrative set in the mouth of the prophet Isaiah. Her individuality and her prophetic role are highlighted by the title with a definite article, whereby her anonymity makes her part of the scenario narrated by the male prophet's mouth. As *han-nēbi'ā*, she is on equal terms with Isaiah, but her namelessness deprives her of independent agency.

The female prophet is not presented as speaking divine words;⁵⁵ rather, giving birth to the child is her oracle.⁵⁶ Naming the witnesses but leaving her anonymous underscores the instrumental nature of her agency, but it is nevertheless divinatory

⁵³ Cf. Silverman, 2019: 21: "Whatever one thinks of the narrator in Nehemiah, these mentions of prophets only make sense if the audience could have accepted the plausibility of prophets still functioning in the same manner."

⁵⁴ On the female prophet in Isaiah 8, see Knauf, 2000; Fischer, 2002: 189–220; Gafney, 2008: 103–107; Williamson, 2010: 74–76; Hamori, 2015: 160–166.

⁵⁵ Unless Isa 8:3–4 is not originally an oracle spoken by her, as suggested by Knauf, 2000.

⁵⁶ Hamori, 2015: 161: "This woman literally delivers an oracle."

agency. She not only carries the prophetic title, but she also participates in the ominous chain of events including the inscription of the son's name by Isaiah, the sexual intercourse between the two, the parturition of the son by herself, and, eventually, the fulfilment of the divine word concerning the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria that will be carried away by the king of Assyria. She is not given independent initiative of any kind; however, acting in tandem with Isaiah she is not left without agency either.⁵⁷

The women “prophesying” in Ezekiel 13

Ezekiel 13 consists of two sections concerning people who are presented as false prophets. The first section (13:1–16) condemns male “prophets of Israel” who are prophesying “out of their own imagination” (13:2: *mil-libbām*). The nature of these prophets is characterized as “seeing false visions and uttering lying divination” (13:8: *han-nēbī'im ha-ḥōzīm šāw' we-haq-qōsēmīm kāzāb*), which seems to refer to verbal prophecy allegedly based on visionary divination.

The second section (13:17–23) concerns “the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own imagination” (13:17: *bēnōt 'ammēkā ham-mitnabbē'ōt mil-libbēhen*). Unlike the men, the women do not carry a prophetic title but they are nevertheless said to prophesy, using the verb *hitnabbē'*. What they do, however, is not intermediation of divine words based on visions, as was the case with the male prophets. Instead, Ezekiel is told to prophesy (*nibbā'*) to them and condemn their practices described in a seemingly detailed manner. The women are said to sew bands on people's wrists and make veils for their heads, thus “hunting down” their lives, “putting to death persons who should not die and keeping alive persons who should not live” (13:18–19). What this is supposed to mean in concrete terms is difficult to figure out. Entrapping “lives” (*nēpāšōt*), which is presented as the function of the bands and veils, has been interpreted, for instance, as necromancy,⁵⁸ but seem indeed refer to activities, imagined or real, the purpose of which was either therapeutic or pernicious.⁵⁹

Only in the concluding verse of the passage the description of the women's activity starts resembling what was said previously of the male prophets: they are supposed to hear that they will no longer “see false visions nor practice divination” (13:23: *šāw' lō' teḥzēnā wē-qesem lō' tiqsamnā 'ōd*). Hence, the image of the women is complemented with two more divinatory terms and thereby made to correspond to that of the male prophets. It is probable that verses 13:22–23

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: 166: “What prior assumptions would need to be in place in order *not* to assume that when a female prophet gives birth to a sign-child, it is her symbolic action as well, and not only the father's? Reading the story as a joint sign-act by the two prophets seems the most straightforward interpretation.”

⁵⁸ Thus Hamori, 2015: 167–183 and Stökl, 2013; cf. Bowen, 1999, who associates the activity of the women with medical and ritual aspects of childbirth.

⁵⁹ Cf. Schmitt, 2004: 285; Berlejung, 2003: 197.

have been added secondarily⁶⁰ for this particular reason.

The practices of the women condemned in Ezekiel 13 are described in seemingly precise but ultimately vague terms – perhaps intentionally so as a part of the enemy rhetoric relying on negative stereotypes.⁶¹ An interesting feature of Ezek 13:17–23 is that the use of the verbal root *nb* ‘overlaps with other divinatory vocabulary – not only \sqrt{hzh} which refers to seeing visions and is often used of prophets’ activity, but also \sqrt{qsm} which denotes oracular and/or divinatory practices always mentioned in a negative tone in the Hebrew Bible. The allegedly lethal effects of the women’s activities cannot be labelled as “prophetic” by any definition.

The activity of the men and women condemned in Ezekiel 13 challenges our customary definition of prophecy and makes especially the women operate at the crossroads of prophecy and other kinds of divination – or, rather, at the interface of divination and magic. The expressions related to entrapping lives indicate magical rather than prophetic agency.⁶² This ritual activity has nothing to do with transmission of divine knowledge but is supposed to bring about a change in the patient’s life, in this case, the *nēpāšōt* manipulated by the women.

In the composition of Ezekiel, the female magicians are juxtaposed with men whose activity is presented as prophetic, however false. The point of the rhetoric of Ezekiel 13 is to deprive both the male and the female diviners of any instrumental divinatory role. Both ways, their agency is presented as distinctly independent “prophesying out of their own imagination.”

Anna

Anna, daughter of Phanuel, is the only woman in the New Testament who has been given a proper name and the title *προφήτις*.⁶³ She is an old woman who has lived as a widow for a long time,⁶⁴ staying permanently in the temple and wor-

⁶⁰ Cf. Pohlmann, 1996: 185–186. Note that verse 13:21, like many other passages in Ezekiel (cf. 6:14; 7:4, 9, 27; 12:16; 17:21; 20:26; 22:16; 23:49; 24:27; 25:17; 28:23, 26; 29:9, 16, 21; 30:26; 35:15; 36:38; 37:28; 38:23), ends with the formulaic conclusion “Then you will know that I am YHWH.”

⁶¹ I am indebted to Patrik Jansson for this perspective.

⁶² Brison, 2019: 103; cf. Schmitt, 2004; 360–362; Brenner-Idan, 2015: 75. For more arguments for the separate but overlapping categories of prophecy and magic, see Nissinen 2020b.

⁶³ Women’s prophetic activity is also reckoned with in Acts 21:9 mentioning the four daughter of Philip who prophesied (*προφητεύουσαι*), as well as in Acts 16:16–18, where a slave-girl with a *πνεῦμα πύθωνα* follows Paul and promotes him and his companions as “slaves of the Most High God”, even though Paul is annoyed and orders the spirit to come out of her. In his own letter, Paul (1 Cor 11:4–5) presupposes that both men and women may prophesy but does not single out any female persons doing so.

⁶⁴ Depending on the interpretation of the Greek text, she is 84 either years old, or has lived as a widow for 84 years; cf. Bovon, 1989: 149: “Wegen ἔως mit Genitiv ist 84 eher ihr

shipping (λατρεύω) there “with fasting and praying night and day” (Luke 2:37). When Joseph and Mary come to the temple to present Jesus, their son, to God, they first meet the old Simeon who praises God, gives a blessing to the family and utters a prediction concerning the destiny of the child as a sign to the people of Israel (2:25–35). Right at that moment Anna enters the scene, begins to praise (ἀνθωμολογέομαι) God and to “speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38).

Surprisingly little has been written about Anna who doubtless counts among the prominent women whom Luke presents to his readers as models of faith.⁶⁵ She may be modelled by Luke after the model of the biblical figures of Hannah and Judith,⁶⁶ and she is often considered a female counterpart to Simeon.⁶⁷ That Anna never leaves the temple but worships there fasting and praying not only makes her appear as an ascetic⁶⁸ but also provides her with a distinctly ritual agency. Even the verbs λατρεύω and ἀνθωμολογέομαι describe her activity in ritual terms, giving the impression that Anna was permanently associated with the temple. Given the virtually non-existent evidence of women’s ritual roles in the context of the Second Temple, the ritual aspect alone makes Luke’s description of Anna noteworthy.

Anna’s prophetic agency has rarely been highlighted, despite her prophetic title. Presumably, however, Luke’s choice of the title προφήτις is not arbitrary but indicates that the readers should appreciate Anna as a prophet. It has been claimed that Anna does not utter an oracle; instead, “her herald’s role is rather to spread the word about this child acknowledged by Simeon.”⁶⁹ There is no need, however, to let Anna’s agency be overshadowed by Simeon’s. It is Anna and not Simeon whom Luke calls a prophet, and her appearance on the stage “at that very moment” (2:38: αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ ἐπιστᾶσα) highlights the unsolicited nature of her performance, which is described as “speaking” about the child. This probably implies more than just talking about him; rather, the verb λαλέω should indeed be understood as inspired prophetic proclamation⁷⁰ juxtaposed with the equally ominous sign (σημεῖον) mentioned by Simeon (2:34). Anna’s prophecy is addressed to those who await the redemption of Israel. This audience can be understood in the

gegenwärtiges Alter als die Dauer ihrer Witwenschaft.”

⁶⁵ See Hultgren, 2009.

⁶⁶ Cf. *ibid.*: 37. Hannah uttered a song of praise (1 Sam 2:1–10) and was considered a prophet in rabbinic tradition (*bMeg* 14a; cf. Hamori, 2015: 102–103), whereas Judith was a widow who fasted continually (*Jdt* 8:6), served God day and night (11:17), and awaited the deliverance of Jerusalem (13:4–5).

⁶⁷ For pairing men and women in Luke–Acts, see D’Angelo, 1999: 181–184.

⁶⁸ Thus Brenner-Idan, 2015: 66.

⁶⁹ Fitzmyer, 1970: 423. Even according to D’Angelo, 1999: 186, “Luke gives Anna no prophetic oracle.”

⁷⁰ For prophets as subjects of λαλέω, cf. Luke 1:70; Acts 28:25; 1 Cor 14:29.

light of Simeons prayer, in which the salvation is prepared for all peoples – the gentiles as well as the tribes of Israel who, in Luke’s words, “earnestly worship day and night,” hoping for God’s promise to come true (Acts 26:6–7).⁷¹ Thus, the prophetic agency of Anna is firmly embedded in the theological context of Luke–Acts, even though after her, women are not given prophetic roles in the Gospel of Luke.⁷²

The multiple (gendered) agencies of the female prophets

The agency perspective has turned out to be helpful in differentiating the roles and functions of female persons who are called prophets in the biblical narrative. The female prophets mentioned in the Hebrew Bible do not form a uniform group – in fact, their social and religious profiles are surprisingly diverse because of their different agencies. There is a surprising amount of variation in their agencies both compared to each other and to the male prophets of the Hebrew Bible. I demonstrate this with comments to the following figure, in which the bullseye © denotes instrumental agency, the fisheye ● stands for independent agency, and the bullet • indicates indirect agency:

	prophetic	ritual	magical	political	leadership	military
Miriam	●	●		●	●	
Deborah	●	●		●	●	●
Huldah	©	•		©		
Noadiah	•			●	●	
Anon (Isa 8)	©		©	•		
Anon (Ezek 13)		●	●			
Anna	©	●				

The agencies of the female prophets mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and in New Testament can be divided in six types, of which three – prophetic, ritual, and magical agency – are clearly religious, whereas the other three – political, military, and leadership – are not primarily religious.

The anonymous group of women accused in Ezek 13:17–23 has hardly anything to do with transmission of divine knowledge, especially if the mentioning of false visions and divination in Ezek 13:23 fulfill primarily editorial purposes to match the women’s activity with the previously mentioned male prophets. Even in Noadiah’s case, the prophetic role is dependent on her title and, perhaps, as the source of the *nēbû’ā* of Shemaiah. Therefore, Noadiah’s prophetic agency re-

⁷¹ Cf. Räsänen, 1991: 103.

⁷² Cf. D’Angelo, 1999: 186–188. For women prophesying in Acts 16:16–18 and 21:9, see above n. 63.

mains indirect at the best. In all remaining cases, the women assume a prophetic role that is valued positively. Huldah, Anna, and the anonymous prophet in Isa 8:1–4 are presented by the narrators as God’s instruments without accent on their subjectivity, although in Huldah’s case some independence can perhaps be sensed between the lines. Miriam and Deborah, on the other hand, are described as active agents, whose prophetic role is bound up with their leadership positions. Miriam’s position is strongly contested in Numbers 12, but at the same time, her agency is presented as highly independent.

Miriam and Deborah are also active ritual agents, both enacting their prophetic role by singing a song of praise. Even Anna praises God, belonging permanently to the temple context. Fasting continuously and praying regularly, she has a most outspoken ritual agency. The use of bands and veils by the women of Ezekiel 13, again, implies the performance of a magical ritual for either therapeutic or maleficent purposes. The women who “prophesy” (*mitnabbé’ôt*), hence, have a magical agency which is generally combined with ritual agency, since magic is seldom practiced without a ritual performance.

On the other hand, the anonymous prophet who gives birth to the child in Isa 8:1–4 participates in a chain of events in which the ominous name of the son is magically connected to a change in the Levantine political structures. Without assuming an independent role, she is given an instrumental agency in the magical action with political consequences. Huldah, too, participates in a scenario with tremendous political effects, but even her role is instrumental rather than independent, since she does not participate in the changes triggered by her oracle.

Some other female prophets assume outspokenly independent political roles. In Noadiah’s case, this is the primary agency given to her as Nehemiah’s adversary, and Miriam’s opposition to Moses in Numbers 12 can be read in similarly political terms. Both women appear as independent agents whose resistance to the male authority is related in negative terms, whereas Deborah’s political agency, including judicial decisions and foreign politics, is presented in a most appreciative way. Independent political agency entails even leadership roles: Noadiah seems to be the *prima inter pares* among the prophets of Jerusalem, and Miriam is not only the leader of female dancers and musicians in Exod 25:20, but even her conflict with Moses highlights authority and leadership structures. Besides her role as a sovereign diviner, Deborah is also a military leader who not only delivers war oracles but goes up to battle, hence being the only biblical prophet with an active and independent military agency.

A few words are at place about a topic that would merit a study of its own: the prophetic women’s agencies from a gendered perspective. None of the six agencies are gender-specific, which raises the question to what extent the female gender of the actors contributes to their description and performance.

The only woman whose performance is presented as specifically feminine is the prophet of Isa 8:1–3. She gives birth to a child, thereby participating in a chain

of events in which she is only given an instrumental agency and anonymous, silenced subjectivity.

The enemy images constructed in Ezekiel 13 build upon the juxtaposition of male and female characters. While the male prophets are accused of verbal transmission of false visions, the women's practices are described as pointedly magical. Magic can be performed by men and women alike and the union of women and magic cannot be considered universal.⁷³ Nevertheless, women are typically not associated with legitimate magic, but female practitioners of magic are generally condemned in the texts of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exod 22:17; 2 Kgs 9:22). This may be "rooted in the broader cultural trope of the religiously and sexually dangerous woman."⁷⁴

Miriam's gendered agency is twofold. She is highly appreciated as the sister of Moses and Aaron (Num 26:59; 1 Chron 5:29) and as the leader of the band of women (Exod 15:20–21). In these contexts, Miriam has an independent role which, however, is subordinated to Moses. This becomes clear when Miriam and Aaron challenge the prophetic authority of Moses (Numbers 12). Both appear as questioning Moses' primacy, but the consequences are strictly gendered: one who becomes punished is the sister, not the brother.

The female gender plays a less decisive role in the description of the other female prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Huldah's identification through her husband Shallum probably serves the purpose of connecting her with the temple and distancing her from it by the same token. Otherwise, it is difficult to see any gender-specific content in what is narrated about Huldah in 2 Kings 22:14–20. The same is true with the brief note on Noadiah in Neh 6:14, unless the prophet's female gender as such has been taken as striking enough to give the reason for naming her specifically.

Deborah is called "Mother of Israel" (Judg 5:7) and the pleonastic but emphatic word "woman" in her title *'iššâ nēbî'â* lays the accent on her female gender. However, the way she performs her motherly and prophetic role is characterized by authority, leadership, and bravery in battle – things that are usually associated with hegemonic masculinity. In fact, Judges 4 deconstructs the conventional male and female performance patterns altogether.⁷⁵

Finally, the female gender of Anna should be seen against the background of the Hellenistic Jewish world in which the Gospel of Luke was written. As the female counterpart of Simeon, she proclaims the redemption of Israel and, by implication, even the salvation of other nations. Her character as a widow and ascetic

⁷³ See Stratton, 2014: 16–19, according to whom the association of magic and women is "ubiquitous but not universal."

⁷⁴ Hamori, 2015: 207. For women and magic in the Hebrew Bible, see also Brison, 2019.

⁷⁵ Eder, 2009: 126: "Ri 4 kommt ganz ohne geschlechtsspezifische Zuordnung von Macht aus. Eine einseitige Zuschreibung auf etwaige 'typische' Männer- oder Frauenmacht ist nicht auszumachen."

not only reminds that of Judith but could also be compared with women who belonged to Jewish ascetic groups in first century CE Alexandria, of whom we know through Philo.⁷⁶ Whether or not Luke was familiar with these groups, his interest in asceticism arises from a similar Hellenistic philosophical background.⁷⁷ Moreover, the permanent sexual abstinence was even part of the figure of the Pythias of Apollo at Delphi,⁷⁸ and may have been a common expectation of a female prophet in Luke's world, however discredited the Greek prophetesses themselves might have been by Christian authors.⁷⁹

Conclusion

What can be learned from the study of female biblical prophets from the perspective of agency? As was emphasized earlier in this essay, the biblical prophetic figures should be taken as characters serving narrative purposes in the first place. The description of Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah, Anna, and the anonymous women in Isaiah and Ezekiel is intrinsically linked to the narrative contexts in which they appear. Therefore, the variety of roles assumed by the female prophets in the Bible is primarily the literary creation of the authors of the pertinent passages in the books of Exodus, Numbers, Judges, Kings, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Nehemiah, and the Gospel of Luke. Miriam in Exodus, Deborah, Huldah, Anna, and the woman mentioned in Isaiah have been given a narrative role that corresponds to the narrator's ethos and contributes constructively to the storyline, whereas Miriam in Numbers, Noadiah, and the women mentioned in Ezekiel are presented as counterimages whose activity appears in dubious light.

Second, the author- and context-bound quality of each and every narrative character advises against reconstructing the historical image of a female prophet in "ancient Israel" on the basis of this source material. The prophetic figures are few and far between, representing different imaginations of what can be expected of a female prophet in a more or less distant past. Nevertheless, the texts may be read as suggestive of some religio-historical circumstances, such as the presence of female prophets in Jerusalem in general (Huldah) and their contribution to the struggle for authority within the community (Noadiah, Miriam in Numeri).

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the variety of agencies of female prophets is significant from the point of view of theory of divination. Whenever a woman engages in inspired transmission of God's word she is given the title *nēbī'ā* or *προφήτις*, which is not the case in other kinds of divination women are found practicing in biblical texts.⁸⁰ This certainly endorses the prevailing defini-

⁷⁶ Cf. Taylor, 2003: 173–340.

⁷⁷ For Luke's advocacy of asceticism, see Garrett, 1999.

⁷⁸ See, e.g., Johnston, 2008: 40–44.

⁷⁹ For Early Christian polemics against non-Christian oracles, see Nieto Ibáñez, 2010.

⁸⁰ Hamori, 2015, for instance, discusses Rebekah (Gen 25:19–26), the Necromancer of Endor (1 Samuel 28), the "wise women" in 2 Samuel, Rachel (Gen 31:17–35), and the

tion of prophecy as a branch of divination based on non-inductive intermediation of divine knowledge. By the same token, however, the significant variety of agencies of the female prophetic figures warns against all too strict adherence to scholarly categories. The ideas about divination may not be identical in every text, and the authors' use of prophetic titles may not be based on exactly similar expectations.

The texts discussed in this essay demonstrate that in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, prophetic agency can be either positively or negatively associated with a female person, depending on the narrative strategy of each text. The negative representation of Miriam and Noadiah does not yet imply a general suspicion against women as prophets, for which there is evidence from later times.⁸¹ The female prophets are presented as effective agents, whether their agency is independent or instrumental, and whether the effects of their agency are valued in good or bad terms.

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mother of Micah (Judges 17) as female diviners in the Hebrew Bible.

⁸¹ Cf. Tervanotko, 2015.

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