

## Anna the Prophet in Luke 2.36-38

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### *Anna the Prophet as a Lukan Character*

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

(Luke 2.36-38, *NRSV* translation)

When Joseph and Mary come to the temple to present Jesus, their firstborn son, to God, and to offer their sacrifices to satisfy the ritual law,<sup>1</sup> they first meet Simeon, the righteous old man to whom the Holy Spirit had promised that he would not see death before he had seen τὸν χριστὸν κυρίου, ‘the Anointed of the Lord.’ Praising God, Simeon gives a blessing to the family and utters a prediction concerning the destiny of the child as a sign to the people of Israel (Luke 2.25-35). Right at that moment (αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ), Anna, daughter of Phanuel, enters the scene. She is an old woman who has lived as a widow for a long time; depending on the interpretation of the Greek text, she is either 84 years old, or has lived as a widow for 84 years.<sup>2</sup> She is staying permanently in the temple and worshipping (λατρεύω) there ‘with fasting and praying night and day,’ and now she begins to praise (ἀνθομολογέομαι) God and to ‘speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem’ (2.38).

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\* With this essay, I would like to congratulate my colleague Antti Laato with warm thanks for several decades’ academic collaboration. Thanks are also due to Outi Lehtipuu and Ismo Dunderberg for their useful comments on the manuscript.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Exod. 13.1-2; 22.28; 34.20; Lev. 12.6-8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. François Bovon, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas (Lk 1,1-9,50)* (EKK 3.1.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1989), p. 149: ‘Wegen ἕως mit Genitiv ist 84 eher ihr gegenwärtiges Alter als die Dauer ihrer Witwenschaft’; thus also the *NRSV* translation and Andrés García Serrano, *The Presentation in the Temple: The Narrative Function of Luke 2:22-39 in Luke-Acts* (AnBib 197; Rome: Gregorian and Biblical Press, 2012), pp. 194-95, who points out the symbolism of Anna’s age as seven times twelve. For the alternative interpretation, reckoning with an allusion to Judith who died at the age of 105 (Jdt 16:23), see J. K. Elliott, ‘Anna’s Age (Luke 2:36-38)’, *NT* 30 (1988), pp. 100-2.

Anna is the only woman in the New Testament who has been given a proper name and the title ‘prophet’ (προφῆτις).<sup>3</sup> She counts among the prominent women whom Luke presents to his readers as models of faith, such as Mary and Elizabeth, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary, and the anonymous woman characterized as a sinner (7.36–50).<sup>4</sup> The frequent appearance of women in Luke’s gospel has been interpreted as a token of his special friendship of women, but it has also been taken as an attempt to restrict and control women and to provide the readers with a humble and submissive female role model.<sup>5</sup> Even Anna can be seen from both perspectives. According to Barbara E. Reid, ‘Anna is not a harmless widow whose pious practices don’t disturb anyone’; yet ‘[d]espite acknowledging Anna as a prophetic figure, Luke diminishes her importance by withholding her words.’<sup>6</sup> However, as I would argue, the woman who ‘speaks about the child to all’ can hardly be seen as being left without words.

No other Lukan character receives such biographical details, by way of which Luke constructs her figure and embeds her in biblical tradition.<sup>7</sup> Luke apparently fashions Anna with some traditional female figures in mind, without aiming at identical portraits. Conspicuously enough, Hannah, the prophet Samuel’s mother, is Anna’s namesake. Hannah, having given birth to her firstborn son, utters a prayer in the sanctuary of Silo. The son is given to the sanctuary as a votary of the Lord and becomes a prophet at a young age (1. Sam. 1.1-2.11); even Hannah herself was considered a prophet in the later rabbinic tradition (*bMeg* 14a).<sup>8</sup> She is associated with topics similar to those in the Lukan narrative, including the firstborn child, the sanctuary, and the woman praying with prophetic words. This cluster of topics is represented by Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna, even though the role-casting is different in each case. Even more affinities can be found between

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘Jezebel’ presented as a self-proclaimed προφῆτις who is ‘teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols’ in Rev. 2.20 is an anonymous figure whose activity is described in a way that brings to mind things other than prophecy.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Stephen Hultgren, ‘Anna (Prophetess): I. New Testament,’ *EBR* 2 (2009), pp. 36-38.

<sup>5</sup> For the latter view, see, e.g., Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996); Jane Schaberg, ‘Luke’, in *Women’s Bible Commentary* (eds. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Expanded Edition; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), pp. 363-80. Cf. Turid Karlsen Seim (*The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* [London: T & T Clark, 2004], p. 249): ‘Luke’s version of the life of Jesus and of the first believers cannot be reduced either to a feminist treasure chamber or to a chamber of horrors for women’s theology. ... The Lukan construction contain a double, mixed message.’

<sup>6</sup> Barbara E. Reid, *Luke 1–9* (Wisdom Commentary 43A; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), pp. 91, 92.

<sup>7</sup> García Serrano, *The Presentation in the Temple*, 193.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Esther J. Hamori, *Women’s Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge* (The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. 102-3.

Anna and Judith, a widow who fasted continually (Jdt 8.4-6), served God day and night (11.17), and awaited the deliverance of Jerusalem (13.4-5); if 84 years refer to the time of her widowhood, even Anna's age may match Judith's 105 years.<sup>9</sup> The patronym Phanuel (Penuel) may refer to Gen. 32.31 'I saw God face to face.' The symbolism of the tribe of Asher is a somewhat enigmatic, but it may call to mind Asher who is presented as the most blessed of Jacob's sons in Deut. 33.24.<sup>10</sup>

Anna is presented in sequence with Simeon and is often considered his female counterpart.<sup>11</sup> Both Simeon and Anna are old people who praise God and look forward to the consolation (παράκλησις) of Jerusalem (Simeon) or the redemption (λύτρωσις) of Jerusalem (Anna), which are clearly parallel expressions.<sup>12</sup> Both are prophetic figures, preceded by Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah, and the pairing of Simeon and Anna evokes Joel's prophecy of both men and women prophesying (Joel 3.1; cf. Acts 2.17).<sup>13</sup> Anna, however, is the only one carrying a prophetic title, which gives emphasis to her prophetic status. In view of the huge importance of prophecy in Luke's writings,<sup>14</sup> this should not go unnoticed. Despite 'Luke's discomfort with the prophetic voice of women in the church',<sup>15</sup> Anna is presented as a prophet who speaks, and her words are not idle talk but carriers of a divine message.

That Anna never leaves the temple but worships there fasting and praying not only makes her appear as an ascetic, but Anna's incessant worship provides her with a distinct ritual agency. This is underlined by the verbs λατρεύω, which is the most common term for ritual worship, and

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<sup>9</sup> For Judith and Hannah as models for Anna, see Susan Harris, 'Letting (H)Anna Speak: An Intertextual Reading of the New Testament Prophetess (Luke 2.36-38)', *Feminist Theology* 27 (2018), pp. 60-74 (67-74).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bauckham ('Anna of the Tribe of Asher (Luke 2:36-38)', *RB* 104 [1997], pp. 161-91), links Anna and her father Phanuel with the book of Tobit, interpreting Anna as a returnee from the exile of the northern tribes in Media, comparable historical figure of Rabbi Nahum the Mede.

<sup>11</sup> For pairing men and women in Luke-Acts, see Mary Rose D'Angelo, '(Re)presentations of Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke Acts', in *Women and Christian Origins* (eds. Ross Shepard Kraemer and eadem; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 171-95 (181-84).

<sup>12</sup> For the parallelity of Simeon and Anna, See García Serrano, *The Presentation in the Temple*, pp. 197-99. According to Paul Figueras, 'Syméon et Anne, ou le témoignage de la Loi et des Prophètes', *NT* 20 (1978), pp. 84-99, Simeon personifies the Law while Anna represents the prophets.

<sup>13</sup> Thus, e.g., Seim, *The Double Message*, p. 177.

<sup>14</sup> For prophecy as a distinctive element of Lukan narrative, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: The Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 147: 'Luke has chosen this means for communicating the theological truth that Jesus was the realization of the prophetic hope of Israel.'

<sup>15</sup> Gail O'Day, 'Acts', in Newsom and Ringe (eds.), *Women's Bible Commentary*, pp. 394-402 (400).

ἀνθομολογέομαι, which is usually associated with acknowledgement and confession, but is also used of liturgical praise.<sup>16</sup> These verbs describe Anna's activity in public and ritual terms, giving the impression that she 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. Even Anna may not have been given an 'official cultic status', whatever that would imply in the case of a woman;<sup>17</sup> however, the title προφήτις combined with her permanent sojourning and ritual function in the temple virtually equals her—unlike Mary, Elizabeth, or any other woman in Luke's Gospel—to a cultic functionary. Such a position is unique: no other women are presented as being permanently affiliated with the temple by Luke or any other writer in the New Testament.

Presumably, Luke's choice of the title προφήτις indicates that the readers should appreciate Anna as a prophet. Unlike in the case of Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon, however, the narrative does not stop here to recount a prophetic prayer from her mouth. Therefore, it has been claimed that Anna does not utter an oracle. Her speaking about the child is not understood as prophecy deriving from God; instead, 'her herald's role is rather to spread the word about this child acknowledged by Simeon.'<sup>18</sup> There is no need, however, to let Anna's prophetic 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. By the same token, the verbal form of speaking, which is an imperfect (ἐλάλει), not an aorist, insinuates that her speech was not restricted to the one occasion. This probably implies more than just spreading the word about him; rather, the verb λαλέω, juxtaposed with the ominous sign (σημεῖον) mentioned by Simeon (2.34), should indeed be understood as inspired prophetic proclamation. A little earlier in Luke's Gospel (1.70), Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, has prophesied (ἐπροφήτευσεν) referring to the prophets of old, through whose mouths God spoke (ἐλάλησεν). In Acts 28.25, Luke uses the same verb of the words spoken by the Holy Spirit through Isaiah (τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐλάλησεν διὰ Ἡσαΐου τοῦ προφήτου) to the fathers of Israel. Even Paul uses λαλέω explicitly of prophetic speech: 'Let two or three prophets speak (λαλείτωσαν), and let the others weigh what is said' (1. Cor. 14.29).

<sup>16</sup> See Ps. 78.13 (LXX); Dan. 4.31 (LXX); 3. Makk. 6.33; *T. Jud.* 1.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church*, 138.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (AB 28; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985 [orig. 1970]), p. 423. Even according to D'Angelo, 'Luke gives Anna no prophetic oracle' ('(Re)presentations of Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke Acts', p. 186); cf. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, p. 147.

To all appearances, Luke has not given the title προφήτις to Anna fortuitously. The title gives a prophetic character to everything Anna speaks about Jesus ‘to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.’ What Anna speaks is, thus, no less prophetic than the preceding prophetic hymns of Zechariah (1.67-79) and Simeon (2.29-32). Anna cannot be seen as being silenced by Luke, even though he has not given words to her message.<sup>19</sup> Simeon is ready to die and talks in the presence of Mary, Joseph, Jesus and, perhaps, Anna. He focuses on the fulfilment of his own desire, whereas Anna’s speech is oriented towards the future and addressed to a much bigger audience, to ‘all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem,’ which implies that her message goes far beyond the intimate circle present at the temple ‘at that very moment.’<sup>20</sup> Indeed, ‘she is the first of the witnesses who speak the word of God to the people.’<sup>21</sup>

Simeon, hence, represents the past, while Anna’s prophecy marks the new era breaking in with the birth of Jesus Christ<sup>22</sup> — in Hans Conzelmann’s classical terms, *Die Mitte der Zeit*.<sup>23</sup> In the light of Simeon’s prayer, in which the salvation is prepared for all peoples, this audience can be understood as comprising the gentiles as well as the tribes of Israel who, in Luke’s words, ‘earnestly worship day and night’ (ἐν ἐκτενείᾳ νύκτα καὶ ἡμέραν λατρεῦον) hoping for God’s promise to come true (Acts 26.6-7).<sup>24</sup> Anna may never leave the temple, but her voice goes out into all the earth.

### *Female Prophets in the New Testament*

Anna is the only woman who is given a prophetic role in the Gospel of Luke.<sup>25</sup> In Acts, however, Luke writes about some women who prophesy, whether in good or bad terms. The four daughters of

<sup>19</sup> Thus, e.g., Barbara E. Reid, ‘Prophetic Voices of Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna in Luke 1-2’, in *New Perspectives on the Nativity* (ed. Jeremy Corley; London: T & T Clark, 2009), pp. 37-46 (44); eadem, *Luke 1–9*, p. 92; cf. García Serrano, *The Presentation in the Temple*, p. 193, according to whom Anna ‘does not say anything.’

<sup>20</sup> Pace Reid, *Choosing the Better Part*, p. 94: ‘By giving Anna no audience for her prophecy, Luke discourages the reader from giving her much notice.’

<sup>21</sup> Harris, ‘Letting (H)Anna Speak,’ p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Seim, *The Double Message*, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *Die Mitte der Zeit: Studien zur Theologie des Lukas* (Seventh Edition; BHTh 17; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993). One should note, however, that Conzelmann does not mention Anna at all.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Heikki Räisänen, ‘The Redemption of Israel: A Salvation-Historical Problem in Luke-Acts’, in *Luke-Acts: Scandinavian Perspectives* (ed. Petri Luomanen; PFES 54; Helsinki: The Finnish Exegetical Society, 1991), pp. 94-114 (103).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. D’Angelo, ‘(Re)presentations of Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke-Acts’, pp. 186-88.

Philip the evangelist who lives in Caesarea are called ‘prophesying virgins’ (παρθένοι προφητεύουσαι, Acts 21.9).<sup>26</sup> ‘Virginity’ probably denotes their unmarried status, although it is difficult to know whether Luke presents this as a requirement of their prophetic role. Nothing more is told about the prophetic activity of Philip’s anonymous daughters who do not occur anywhere else in the New Testament. About a century later, however, the daughters of Philip were recognized by the Montanists who used them as models for the female prophets of their ‘New Prophecy.’<sup>27</sup> The Early Christian tradition of Philip’s daughters is not entirely dependent on Acts. They are mentioned in a fragment of Papias (frg. 10), and when Eusebius writes about them in his *Ecclesiastical History*, he refers not only to Acts but to two other sources as well. In his letter to Victor, the bishop of Rome, Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, refers to two aged virgin daughters of Philip who are buried together with their father in Hierapolis, and a third daughter resting at Ephesus. In the Dialogue of Caius with Proclus, Proclus mentions ‘four prophetesses, the daughters of Philip, at Hierapolis in Asia’ where they all are buried.<sup>28</sup> Thus it is probable that these women, even though anonymous, epitomize a favorable attitude towards female prophecy at least by some circles in Early Christianity.

Luke’s approval of the prophetic activity of the daughters of Philip turns towards a much less sympathetic treatment of a woman who is found prophesying in the Macedonian city of Philippi (Acts 16.16-18).<sup>29</sup> She is a slave who is believed to have a ‘spirit of divination,’ by which her owners profited economically. Following in Paul’s footsteps for several days, she cries out, probably in an altered state of consciousness,<sup>30</sup> that he and his companion are ‘slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ An oracle of God in favour of Paul as this would sound like, the slave woman is not presented as a true prophet. Both the designation of the spirit of divination, πνεῦμα πύθωνα, and the form and function of the oracle associate her with the Greek oracle practice, thus throwing suspicion on the origin of her oracles and the context of her

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<sup>26</sup> For Philip’s daughters in Acts, see, e.g., Seim, *The Double Message*, pp. 180-183.

<sup>27</sup> For the Montanist female prophets, see Antti Marjanen, ‘Female Prophets among Montanists’, in *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East* (eds. Jonathan Stökl and Corrina Carvalho; SBLAIL 15; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), pp. 127-43.

<sup>28</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.31.2-5; cf. 3.39.9-10; 5.17.3; 5.24.2; for Philip and his daughters in the second century sources, see Christopher R. Matthews, *Philip, Apostle and Evangelist: Configurations of a Tradition* (NTSup 105; Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 23-27.

<sup>29</sup> See Seim, *The Double Message*, 172-174; Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *Destabilizing the Margins: An Intersectional Approach to Early Christian Memory* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), pp. 122-132.

<sup>30</sup> Thus Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*, p. 268.

divinatory activity.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, she is acting on behalf of her owners whose greed for money alone is enough to discredit the words of their slave. This justifies Paul to silence her and to exorcise the spirit speaking through her. It is said that the spirit came out that very moment (αὐτῇ τῇ ὥρᾳ), thus the spirit is presented as really existing, and the divinatory agency of the woman is recognized even though the words spoken by her originate from a wrong source. This woman is indeed silenced by Luke, and her narrative function is to act as a counterimage of Paul.<sup>32</sup>

Paul himself in his letters takes it for granted that women may act as prophets. In First Corinthians, Paul is at pains to define the gendered structure of the congregation (ἐκκλησία) and women's position in this ritual space.<sup>33</sup> In the eleventh chapter of this letter, Paul addresses the problem of gender-specific ritual conduct, on which Paul makes various suggestions without arriving at a definitive conclusion. On women he writes: 'any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head—it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved' (1. Cor. 11.5). The issue here is not prophecy as such but the proper performance of ritual, that is, women's veiling their heads while praying. That women may prophesy is mentioned in a neutral fashion as a matter of course. However, when Paul develops his thought about prophecy further in chapter 14, he comes to the conclusion that women actually should remain silent, 'for it is shameful for a woman to speak in the congregation' (1. Cor. 14.34-36). This contradicts what he had written earlier in 11:5,<sup>34</sup> and is difficult to reconcile with what he writes about his female apostolic colleagues Phoebe, the deacon at Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1), and Junia, whom he says to be 'prominent among apostles' (Rom. 16:7).<sup>35</sup> Paul's letters, hence, do not yield a uniform and coherent picture of his view on the role of women in Christian communities of his time.

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<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 269. The expression πνεῦμα πύθωνα evokes both the Delphic oracle and its prophetic speaker, the Pythia, and the snake that once inhabited Delphi and was killed by Apollo whose mouthpieces the Pythias were believed to be; see Plutarch, *Mor.* 414E; Strabo, *Geogr.* 9.3.12.

<sup>32</sup> O'Day, 'Acts,' 400: 'She is only a narrative prop to show the power of God at work in Paul.'

<sup>33</sup> See Jorunn Økland, *Women in Their Place: Paul and the Corinthian Discourse of Gender and Sanctuary Space* (JSNTSup 269; London: T & T Clark, 2004). Generally, Paul makes a clear difference between the sexes, men presenting as the normal case and women marking the difference (*ibid.*, pp. 194-199).

<sup>34</sup> It has long been suggested that verses 14.34-36 are a later addition; for the interpolation theories, see Økland (*ibid.*, pp. 149-52), who considers the burden of proof to be on the shoulders of those who believe in interpolation. In Økland's words, Paul 'constructs the *ekklesia* as a separate space of representation *within* the walls of the house. *Time, people, clothing and rituals*, not material space, constitute the boundaries around this space that is called the temple of God, the body of Christ or similar. Within this space there is a particular pattern of action and a particular place for everything following a cosmic order – but all this has to be spelled out by Paul since there are no walls or other material texts indicating it.'

<sup>35</sup> For Junia and the debate concerning her gender and apostolic status, see Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

Nevertheless, Paul's letters provide historical evidence of women's acting as prophets in the ritual setting of regular worship, as well as of different attitudes towards them in Early Christian communities.

### *Anna as an Eastern Mediterranean Prophet*

The Gospel of Luke presents Anna as an ascetic prophet who lived in the temple premises and whose life followed a ritual order ruled by prayer and fasting. A widow for a long time, she does not have a husband, and nothing is told about her family configuration otherwise. To the reader, all this would imply that the temple, instead of a family, formed the most immediate, if not the only context for her life. Female prophets are well known from ancient Near Eastern sources,<sup>36</sup> and the extant documentation from different times and places suggests that temples were the important venues for women's prophetic performances. Already the Old Babylonian documents from Mari (17th cent. BCE) mention women prophesying in temples, whether performing in the annual ritual of Ištar<sup>37</sup> or arising in the temple of Annunitum to deliver unsolicited oracles.<sup>38</sup> A millennium later, in the seventh-century BCE Assyria, women are found delivering the words of Ištar, whose temple in the city of Arbela featured as the principal source of prophecy in the Neo-Assyrian period;<sup>39</sup> even

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<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the entire source material, see Martti Nissinen, *Prophetic Divination: Essays in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (BZAW 494; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 127-52 (= idem, 'Nichtmännliche Prophetie in Quellen des Alten Orients', in *Prophetie* [ed. Irmtraud Fischer and Juliana Claassens; Die Bibel und die Frauen 1.2; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019], pp. 65-94); for the agency of the female prophets, see idem, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 297-325.

<sup>37</sup> FM 3 3 (see Nele Ziegler, *Les musiciens et la musique d'après les archives de Mari* [Florilegium Marianum 9/Mémoires de NABU 10; Paris: Sepoa, 2007], pp. 63-64 = SBLWAW 41 52 (see Martti Nissinen, with Contributions by C. L. Seow, Robert K. Ritner, and H. Craig Melchert, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Second Edition; SBLWAW 41; Atlanta, SBL Press, 2019), pp. 88-89).

<sup>38</sup> ARM 26 200; 201; 237 (see Jean-Marie Durand, *Archives épistolaires de Mari* [Vol. I/1; ARM 26; Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1988], pp. 429-30, 478-79) = SBLWAW 41 10; 11; 42 (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, pp. 34-35, 71-73). Cf. the woman with the title *qammatum* prophesying in Terqa, probably in the temple of Dagan, ARM 26 197; 199; 203 (Durand, *Archives épistolaires*, pp. 424, 426-29, 431-32) = SBLWAW 41 7; 9; 13 (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, pp. 28-29, 31-33, 37).

<sup>39</sup> SAA 9 1.1-4, 8-10; 2.2-3; 3.5; 5; 6; 9 (see Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies* [SAA 9; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997], pp. 4-6, 9-11, 14-16, 25-27, 34-35, 40-41) = SBLWAW 41 68-71; 75-77; 79-80; 88; 90-91; 94 (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, pp. 112-15, 119-21, 122-24, 133-37, 141-42). For the temple called Egašankalamma, see Raija Mattila and Martti Nissinen, 'The Temple of Ištar in Arbela', forthcoming in *Advances in Ancient Biblical and Near Eastern Research* 1 (2021).

other Assyrian temples appear as venue of women's prophetic performances.<sup>40</sup> Most plausibly (although not explicitly stated anywhere), these prophets belonged to the temple personnel; in the case of the temple votaresses (*šēlūtu*) who are sometimes found uttering prophetic words, this is all the more probable.<sup>41</sup> Of the few female prophets of Hebrew Bible, at least one is indirectly associated with the temple of Jerusalem. Huldah (2. Kgs 22.3-20) is presented as the wife of Shallum, the keeper of (temple) wardrobe, although it is made clear that she herself is to be found in the 'new quarter' of the city instead of the temple premises. This creates simultaneously a connection and a distance between her and the temple that from the point of view of the Deuteronomistic author has been wrongly maintained.<sup>42</sup>

The female prophets belonging to or associated with ancient Near Eastern temples are known first and foremost because of the divine messages they intermediate. Next to nothing concerning their person and life is recorded in the sources. We are not informed about their family configurations, and we do not know how they participated in the life of the temple communities; for instance, if their life can be characterized as that of an ascetic.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, their affiliation with the temples of Ištar demonstrates the strong tie between temple and prophecy, female prophecy in particular, and provides a cultural pattern for later temple prophets such as the Lukan Anna.

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<sup>40</sup> SAA 13 37 (Steven W. Cole and Peter Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* [SAA 13; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1998], pp. 36-37 = SBLWAW 41 111 (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, p. 180). Female prophets appear to have a role in the festivities of the main temple of Aššur in the city of Assur in SAA 12 69 (Laura Kataja and Robert M. Whiting, *Grants, Decrees and Gifts of the Neo-Assyrian Period* [SAA 12; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1995], pp. 71-77 = SBLWAW 41 110 (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, p. 179), and they are mentioned in a Middle Assyrian (11th cent. BCE) food rations list from Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta in VS 19.1 (Helmut Freidank, 'Zwei Verpflegungstexte aus Kār-Tukultī-Ninurta', *AoF* 1 [1974], pp. 58-73) = SBLWAW 41 123 (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, p. 214).

<sup>41</sup> The votaresses are mentioned in SAA 9 1.7 (Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, p. 9) and SAA 13 148 (Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, p. 119) = SBLWAW 41 74; 114 (Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, pp. 118-19, 182).

<sup>42</sup> For further arguments, see Martti Nissinen, 'The Agencies of Female Prophets in the Bible: Independent or Instrumental? Prophetic or Political?', in *Perception and (Self-)Presentation of Powerful Women in the Ancient World* (eds. Kerstin Droß-Krüpe and Sebastian Fink; Melammu Workshops and Monographs 4; Münster: Zaphon Verlag, 2021), forthcoming; cf. Francesca Stavrakopoulou, 'The Prophet Huldah and the Stuff of State', in *Enemies and Friends of the State: Ancient Prophecy in Context* (ed. Christopher A. Rollston; University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018), pp. 277-96. It can be only speculated whether Noadiah and 'the rest of the prophets' mentioned in Neh. 6.14 as Nehemiah's opponents who try to intimidate him, are affiliated with the temple of Jerusalem. Since the temple is mentioned in the preceding verses (6.10-13) as the place of intimidation, this may be seen as a distinct possibility. Since Noadiah's role is presented as predominantly, political, nothing more can be known of Noadiah's socioreligious position.

<sup>43</sup> Simo Parpola (*Assyrian Prophecies*, xxxiv), interprets the life of the Assyrian prophets in ascetic terms as emulation of goddess Ištar and her agony.

While the ancient Near Eastern sources importantly demonstrate the persistent tradition of women's prophetic involvement in the Near Eastern cultural sphere, and the female prophetic figures of the Hebrew Bible were certainly known to Luke,<sup>44</sup> the most immediate context of Anna's character is the first-century CE Eastern Mediterranean world in which the Gospel of Luke was written.<sup>45</sup> A bilingual inscription from the sanctuary of Niha at Baalbek mentions a female ascetic of very old age called Hochmaea, a virgin (seer) of the Syrian goddess.<sup>46</sup> The female prophets of the famous oracle sites of Apollo in Delphi and Didyma are not only contemporary to Luke's writings but provide evidence for patterns of female prophetic roles that may have served as a background image for the figure of Anna.<sup>47</sup> The women acting as Apollo's mouthpieces in both sanctuaries were permanently appointed by the sanctuaries to fulfill their prophetic task and, whether or not they can be appropriately called ascetics, a ritual purity was required from them, including fasting before the prophetic performance at least at Didyma.<sup>48</sup> The permanent sexual abstinence seems to have been part of the figure of the Pythias of Apollo at Delphi.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah as background figures for Anna, see Harris, 'Letting (H)Anna Speak,' pp. 63-67.

<sup>45</sup> For early Christian prophecy and its Greco-Roman cultural context, see the still unsurpassable work of Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity*; cf. Christopher Forbes (*Prophecy and Inspired Speech in Early Christianity and Its Hellenistic Environment* [WUNT 2/75; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995]), who regards prophecy in the Greco-Roman world and prophecy in Early Christianity as "very different phenomena" (ibid. p. 308).

<sup>46</sup> *IGLS* 6 2929:

(A) Sex(tus) Allius Iullus vet(eranus) monumentum Ochmaeae virgini vati deae Syr(iae) Nihat(enae) fecit

(B) Οχμιαια παρθένος θεᾶς Ἀταργάτεις ἔζη ἔτη ἑκατόν

Another inscription (*IGLS* 6 2928) probably mentions the same woman, indicating that she lived to be a hundred years old and that she had not eaten bread for 20 years. See Simone Eid Paturel, *Baalbek-Heliopolis, the Bekaa, and Berytus from 100 BCE to 400 CE: A Landscape Transformed* (Mnemosyne Supplements 426; Leiden: Brill, 2019), pp. 177-78. For further evidence from Syria, see Marco Frenschkowski, *Prophetie: Innovation, Tradition und Subversion in spätantiken Religionen* (StAC 10; Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 2018), pp. 72-76.

<sup>47</sup> For the female prophets at Delphi and Didyma, see, e.g., Michael A. Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 215-25; Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (Blackwell Ancient Religions; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), pp. 40-50; Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, pp. 228-33.

<sup>48</sup> Thus Iamblichus, *Myst.* 3.11.

<sup>49</sup> Plutarch presents the Pythia as an unmarried woman over fifty years old who lived a cloistered and chaste life, 'inexperienced, unlearned about almost everything and truly virginal with respect to her soul' (Plutarch, *Mor.* 5.405d). For the Pythia's sexual abstinence as a matter of ritual purity, see Flower, *The Seer in Ancient Greece*, pp. 224-25; Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, pp. 42-43.

However discredited the Greek oracles and prophetesses might have been by Christian authors,<sup>50</sup> Anna's character as a widow and ascetic may meet a common expectation of a female prophet in Luke's world. Anna's characterization not only reminds of that of Judith but could also be compared with women who were an integral part of the Jewish ascetic association called the Therapeutae in first century CE Alexandria, of whom Philo writes in his *De vita contemplativa*.<sup>51</sup> These female philosophers were dedicated to contemplative life outside the world of domesticity and procreation:

They are mostly elderly virgins. They strongly maintain the purity, out of necessity, as some of the priestesses of the Greeks [do], but out of their own free will, because of a zeal and yearning for Wisdom, which they are eager to live with. They take no heed of the pleasures of the body, and desire not a mortal offspring, but an immortal one, which only a soul which is loved by God is able to give birth to, by itself, because the Father has sown in it lights of intelligence which enabled her to see the doctrines of Wisdom.<sup>52</sup>

Without exactly corresponding to the Alexandrian female philosophers, the character of Anna shares with them her old age, her purity, and her life outside a domestic context. Whether or not Luke was familiar with these groups, his idea of an ascetic female prophet is doubtless rooted in a similar philosophical background.

Luke's predilection for asceticism is generally recognized. Susan Garrett has identified three ascetic disciplines in Luke's writings: (1) 'Prayer as a Guard against Satanic Temptation'; (2) 'Watchfulness in Preparation for the Coming of the Son of Man'; and (3) 'Self-Denial to Ward Off Greed and Arrogance'.<sup>53</sup> All three aspects can be seen as embodied in Anna who prays day and

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<sup>50</sup> See, e.g., Jesús María Nieto Ibáñez, *Cristianismo y profecías de Apolo: Los oráculos paganos en la Patrística griega (siglos II-V)* (Madrid: Trotta, 2010), pp. 84-103.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First Century Alexandria: Philo's 'Therapeutae' Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 227-64.

<sup>52</sup> Philo, *Contempl.* 68 (trans. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, pp. 354-55).

<sup>53</sup> Susan R. Garrett, 'Beloved Physician of the Soul? Luke as Advocate for Ascetic Practice', in *Asceticism and the New Testament* (eds. Leif E. Vaage and Vincent L. Wimbush; New York and London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 71-96 (82-87). For Luke's predilection for asceticism, see also Turid Karlsen Seim, 'Children of the Resurrection: Angelic Asceticism in Luke-Acts', *ibid.*, pp. 115-25; eadem, *Double Message*, pp. 185-248; Hans-Ulrich Weidemann, 'Engelsgleiche, Abstinente—und ein moderater Weintrinker: Asketische Sinnproduktion als literarische Technik im Lukasevangelium und im 1. Timotheusbrief', in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses* (ed. idem; NTOA 101; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), pp. 21-68.

night; who talks about the child to those who wait for the redemption of Israel; and whose cloistered life in the temple certainly implies self-denial. Together with Virgin Mary and the daughters of Philip, Anna epitomizes the bond between sexual abstinence (virginity or widowhood) and prophecy in the writings of Luke,<sup>54</sup> who, for his part, shares it with his Greco-Roman philosophical environment.

Especially Anna's location in the temple may be due to the association to temple-based prophets in the first place. Women functioning in temples are otherwise unknown in the New Testament,<sup>55</sup> and there is no evidence of women being permanently affiliated with the temple of Jerusalem either. This strengthens the impression of the character of Anna as being constructed by Luke on the basis of a cultural model rather than of his knowledge of the human resources of the destroyed temple of Jerusalem.

### *Conclusion*

Among the women in Luke-Acts, Anna is given a pivotal role as the prophetic herald of the new era breaking in with Jesus. Like many other women in Luke's writings, she only performs once and then disappears. Nevertheless, she cannot be silenced even by claiming her to be silenced by Luke, since she does indeed speak and her prophetic speech about the child Jesus is addressed to the entire audience of Luke's Gospel. The prophetic role is given to Anna consciously by calling her *προφήτις* and characterizing her accordingly. Anna is constructed by Luke in a way that is rooted in the biblical tradition but compares well even with the contemporary female ascetics living outside the conventional domestic context. Importantly, Anna is the only woman in the New Testament who is presented as being permanently affiliated with the temple. This does not resonate with anything we know about women's relation to the temple in Early Judaism; instead, the characterization of Anna conforms to the cultural pattern of Near Eastern and Greek temple-based female prophets.

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<sup>54</sup> Thus Weidemann, 'Engelsgleiche, Abstinente—und ein moderater Weintrinker,' 34, who notes that married people are never associated with prophetic activity: 'Geisterfüllte und prophetisch begabte Verheiratete sucht man vergebens'; cf. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 256-58.

<sup>55</sup> The few women serving in the temple precinct in the Hebrew Bible (Exod. 38.8; 1. Sam. 2.22) have hardly served as positive models for Anna.

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