8 Women Prophets

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 1.5

I Prophetesses in the Hebrew Bible

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What is it prophets do and is it a job for a nice biblical girl? And if it is a job for a nice biblical girl, how do the nice post-biblical boys who interpreted the biblical text for us feel about that? This chapter looks first at women called 'prophet' in the Hebrew Bible, then at the women described as prophet by the rabbis of the Talmud. In English 'prophecy' is synonymous with 'telling the future'. In biblical thought prophets are messengers who bring God's word to the people; a prophet's message from God may indeed describe future events, but foretelling the future is not the essence of prophecy; to prophesy is to proclaim God's word, whether that word is a call to righteous behaviour or a warning of the consequences of idolatry. Any reader of the Bible can see that it describes women's relationships with God and that women, including women prophets, are able to hear God speaking to them. What about conveying God's message to the people? While only a minority of the biblical prophets are women, those who are prophets conveyed God's message like any other prophet. Post-biblical Jewish tradition has a more ambivalent attitude to women prophets because of the unwillingness experienced in Judaism, as in Christianity and other traditions, during some eras to recognize women as public figures.

Interestingly, the women described as 'prophet' in the Bible are somewhat different from the list of women prophets given in the Talmud, the

early medieval compendium of rabbinic law and lore to which all later Jewish codes refer. Women named as prophets in the biblical text include Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah (of whom nothing other than her name is known)[1] and the wife of Isaiah whose own name, as distinct from her husband's, is not given.[2] It is unclear from the context whether Isaiah's wife was a prophet in her own right or whether 'prophetess' means that as Isaiah's wife she is 'Mrs Prophet' similar to the way in German 'Frau Doktor' used to mean a doctor's wife.[3]

Miriam is the first woman to be called prophet in the Bible. We first meet her watching over her baby brother Moses lying in his basket in the Nile. When he was found by Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam offered to find a wet nurse for him, thus ensuring he was still cared for in the bosom of his family. After the Exodus when the Children of Israel cross the Sea of Reeds dry-shod, we read that: '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 Eternal, who has triumphed gloriously; throwing horse and rider into the sea."'[4] The Bible gives only this one verse of her song yet Moses' song lasts a whole chapter. Although she is described here as a prophet we do not hear any of her prophecies. The rabbinic interpreters, keen as always to fill in any gaps in the biblical text, ascribed a prophecy to her that restricts her to the role of God's messenger to the family:

> 'And there went a man of the house of Levi.'[5] Where did he go? Rabbi Judah son of Zebina said that he went in the counsel of his daughter. A *Tanna* [rabbi from before 200 CE] taught: Amram, Miriam's father, was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed 'Every son that is born you shall cast into the river', he said: In vain do we labour. He arose and divorced his wife. All [the Israelites] thereupon arose and divorced their wives. His daughter

1 Neh. 6.14.

2 Isa. 8.3.

3 'Frau Doktor' is now used by women who are doctors. Rabbi Regina Jonas, the first woman rabbi, used to have to make it explicit to those she visited in hospital that she was a rabbi herself rather than the wife of a rabbi. Elizabeth Sarah, 1994, 'Rabbiner Regina Jonas 1902–1944: Missing link in a broken chain', in Sybil Sheridan (ed.), *Hear Our Voices: Women Rabbis Tell their Stories*, London: SCM Press, p. 6.

4 Exod. 15.20.

5 Exod. 2.1.

said to him, 'Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's; because Pharaoh decreed only against the males whereas you have decreed against the males and females [by preventing all births]' ... He arose and took his wife back; and they all arose and took their wives back. 'And took to wife'[6] – it should have read 'and took back'! Rabbi Judah son of Zebina said: – He acted towards her as though it had been the first marriage; he seated her in a palanquin, Aaron and Miriam danced before her, and the Ministering Angels proclaimed, A joyful mother of children[7] ... 'And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took etc.' [Why does the Bible say]: 'the sister of Aaron' and not the sister of Moses? It teaches that she prophesied while she yet was the sister of Aaron only and said: 'My mother will bear a son who will be the saviour of Israel.' When Moses was born, the whole house was filled with light; and her father arose and kissed her upon her head, saying 'My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled.'[8]

The only occasion on which Miriam spoke out in public we see her frustration – Moses, despite his Cushite (non-Jewish) wife, was the leader and prototype rabbi, Aaron was the High Priest and what was her role? Her words are not accepted and she is punished with leprosy for uttering them. But we learn too that the people were loyal to her because they all, not just the women whom she led in song, refuse to move on without her.[9] 'Difficult' women may be easier to deal with after their death when their assertive demands for a voice need no longer be addressed. The commentators noticed that as soon as Miriam died the people were thirsty and said that they were rescued by water from 'Miriam's well'.[10] Later Jewish mystical tradition said it was Miriam's merit and her well that not only rescued the people from thirst in the wilderness but enabled all Jewish learning to take place:

Only by the merit of Miriam did the well reappear to them during their desert wanderings. But why was the well revealed in the name of Miriam? ... As a midwife in Egypt she had used her voice in her work ... With a voice as calming as the rippling of water, Miriam coaxed reluc-

6 Exod. 2.1.
7 Ps. 113.9.
8 Babylonian Talmud *Sotah* 12a.
9 Num. 12.1–15.
10 *Numbers Rabbah* 1.2 (a collection of exegesis on the book of Numbers).

> tant new-borns out of the womb and into the world. After the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea, Miriam and the women took up instruments as they danced and sang the song of redemption ... It was believed that God gave the well in Miriam's name, since Moses could barely speak, let alone sing, while the voice of Aaron the priest was so loud that it frightened both children and animals ... But later when they entered the Promised Land, Miriam's well disappeared. It was thought that it had vanished because they were in their homeland once again and it was natural to drink from other wells. But some missed Miriam's well and never stopped their search for it. They were the students of the Torah who sought its sustenance in the wisdom of the sacred text ... One drink from its pure waters was said to alert the heart, mind and soul and make the meanings of the Torah become more clear.[11]

Deborah was one of the Judges who led the people for several generations between the death of Joshua, Moses' disciple, and the development of the next leaders of the people, the prophets and kings who provided spiritual and military leadership in tandem. Deborah is the only one of the judges who is also described as a prophet (although Moses and Samuel both included judging in their role). Male Judges, like Jepthah, both judged and led in war: Deborah had Barak to be her general. Yet he insisted that she accompany the campaign, which shows her importance to her generation: Saul did not insist on Samuel being present when he fought to defend Israel: the people had wished to appoint a king to lead them in battle and once he had been anointed king he did not need Samuel's support in that role.[12] Once the campaign is over, Deborah and Barak sang a song of triumph in which delight at having vanquished their enemy is tempered by awareness of the pain suffered by Sisera's mother when her son did not return home.[13] Deborah described herself in the song as a 'mother in Israel'. None of the judges or prophets is described as a 'father in Israel'. Perhaps this is an early example of combining motherhood and professional life – women in public life now who have children find their role as mother generates more comment than their male colleagues' role as father. Deborah's leadership was accepted in the Bible but seems to have

11 Penina Adelman, 1986, *Miriam's Well*, New York, Biblio Press, p. 63. Jewish post-biblical tradition identified the midwives who refused to kill the Hebrew baby boys with Miriam and her mother Jocheved.

12 1 Sam. 8.19–20.

13 Judg. 5.28.

worried the Talmudic sages. The palm tree under which she sat when giving judgement was, we are told, to prevent inappropriate seclusion with men since a palm tree's branches are all high up and do not screen anyone sitting under it.[14] Is this just a way of drawing a moral point? Did the rabbis really, truly think that Deborah, prophet, judge and mother in Israel[15] would have behaved immodestly with those who brought their cases before her if she had given judgement under the embracing branches of a willow tree?

Miriam was mystically mythologized and removed from centre stage but Deborah's public leadership as a judge was too explicit to be denied. Attempts have been made to explain it away – the medieval exegetes of the Talmud, the Tosafists, suggested in their commentary that she taught others rather than judging herself – which Joel Roth points out at least makes her teaching authoritative even if not her power to judge. More helpfully the Tosafists suggested that her authority may have derived from people's acceptance of her in this role.[16] Maimonides, the medieval codifier and philosopher, said that women may not take on public leadership roles: Deborah is frequently cited as a counter-argument in discussions of this claim,[17] whether on women's ordination or for women like Leah Shakdiel who broke new ground in 1988 by being elected to her local religious council in Israel.

In the book of Kings the prophet Huldah and her husband live in a *mishneh*, variously translated 'second quarter' and 'college'. It is possible that this means that Huldah combined the roles of prophet and scholar as Deborah combined prophecy and judgement. When a 'scroll of the teaching', assumed to be Deuteronomy was found, it was taken to Huldah to be verified. Huldah said it was indeed God's word and with delicate tact, encouraged Josiah to stay on the straight and narrow path of monotheism.[18] Although the Bible recognized Deborah and Huldah as prophets who convey God's word, it seems that their public role as prophet worried the rabbis of the Talmud who began the process of interpreting the Bible

14 Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 14a: And she sat under a palm tree. Why just a palm tree? – R. Simeon b. Abishalom said: [To avoid] privacy.

15 Judg. 5.7.

16 See Joel Roth, 1988, in Simon Greenberg (ed.), *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis: Studies and Responsa*, New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, p. 164–5.

17 Maimonides (1135–1204), *Mishneh Torah* Laws of Kings 1.5.

18 2 Kings 22.8–20.