

Chapter Five

HULDAH AND OTHER BIBLICAL PROPHETESSES

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Huldah and other prophetesses are commended in the Bible for their prophetic work. In view of the divinely approved role of women as God's servants, it is important that these commendations be understood accurately.

1. *The Function of Prophets and Prophetesses*

A. *The Biblical Definition of a Prophet.* A prophet is one who speaks for God to a specific audience. At least five biblical texts contain this definition.

1. According to Exod 7:1, the Lord said to Moses, "See I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be *your prophet*." According to the parallel passage in Exod 4:16, the Lord said to Moses, "He [Aaron] shall *speak for you to the people*, and he shall be a *mouth for you*, and you shall be to him as God." As Moses' "prophet," Aaron "speaks for him" or "is a mouth for him" to a designated audience. In this relationship, Moses is to Aaron what God is to a prophet.¹

2. According to Amos 7:16, Amaziah the priest of Bethel forbade Amos to proclaim God's message any longer in North Israel, saying, "Do not *prophesy* against Israel, and do not *preach* against the house of Isaac." The synonymous parallelism shows that "to prophesy" is "to preach."

¹See G. V. Smith, "Prophet; Prophecy," *ISBE*, 3.988.

3. Jer 1:5 relates these words of the Lord to Jeremiah, "I appointed you *a prophet to the nations*." Jeremiah tried to evade the Lord's call by saying, "I do not know how to *speak*" (v. 6). But the Lord insisted, saying, "You shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall *speak* whatever I command you" (v. 7). This passage indicates that a prophet is someone God sends to a specific audience (here, the nations) to speak to that audience whatever God commands.

4. In response to Jeremiah's second recorded complaint, in which he accuses the Lord of forsaking him when his persecutors curse and insult him (Jer 15:10-18), the Lord calls him to repent, and promises that if he will utter what is precious, he will "serve as my [God's] *mouth*" (v. 19). This text shows that a prophet is a "mouth(piece)" for God to a designated audience.

5. In the course of trying to resolve the conflict between the tongue-speakers and the prophets in the church at Corinth in the first century AD, Paul states matter-of-factly that "those who *prophesy speak* to other people for their up-building and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor 14:3). Here again, a "prophet" is defined as one who "speaks to" others in God's behalf.

B. *Biblical Metaphors Indicating a Prophet's Function.* Biblical speakers and writers used metaphors from at least four spheres of life very familiar in their day to portray the function of a "prophet."

1. *From Activities in the Royal Court.* Frequently God is depicted as a "king" who "sits on his throne" "reigning" over his creation, mankind, and his own chosen people (Exod 15:18; 1 Sam 8:7; 2 Kgs 19:15; Pss 47:2, 7-8; 99:1; 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 7:10; etc.). Biblical writers use four terms in reference to a prophet in the context of this metaphor.

a) *A Prophet is a Member of God's Council.* In ancient times, a king gathered a select council of trusted individuals before him at the beginning of each day. He told them their respective responsibilities and sent out each one to

accomplish his/her task for that day. This often consisted of taking the king's message to an individual or a group. Thus, the biblical writers spoke of a prophet as a member of God's council whom God sent out to carry his message to a designated audience. God condemns false prophets in the following language:

I did not *send* the prophets,
yet they *ran*;
I did not speak to them,
yet they prophesied.
But if they had *stood in my council*,
they would have *proclaimed my words*
to my people (Jer 23: 21-22; see v. 18).

Again, a prophet is defined as one who *proclaims* God's words to a specified audience.

b) *A Prophet is a Man of God.* When a king sent a man to do a specific task, that person ceased to be "his own man"; he was "the king's man." For example, Ittai the Gittite refused to leave king David when news came that Absalom was on his way to Jerusalem to usurp the throne from his own father; Ittai had committed himself to David, and he resolved to be faithful to that commitment (2 Sam 15:13-23). Accordingly, a faithful prophet of God did not belong to himself; he belonged to his King, Yahweh; he was a "man of God" (1 Sam 2:27; 9:6-8, 10; 2 Kgs 5:8).

c) *A Prophet is a Servant of God.* In one sense of the term, every person in a nation was the "servant" of the king of that nation. Still, ancient Near Eastern kings had a special group of individuals as confidants who were always ready to serve. Thus, Saul, was surrounded at Gibeah by "his servants" under the charge of Doeg the Edomite when he learned of the whereabouts of David and his companions (1 Sam 22:6-10). Thus, the "confidants/ confidantes" of Yahweh are his prophets/prophetesses. Accordingly, "my/ his servants the prophets" is a common, stereotyped phrase in Scripture (see Amos 3:7; Jer 7:25; 26:5).

d) *A Prophet is a Messenger of God.* A king in the ancient Near East usually sent out members of his council with a message from that king to a specified audience. Naturally, these individuals are called "the king's messengers" (see 1 Kgs 20:2, 5; 2 Kgs 19:9, 14), which appears interchangeably with "the king's servants" (1 Kgs 20:6). Similarly, the Bible refers to a "prophet" (Hag 1:1) as "the messenger of the Lord" (Hag 1:13), to "prophets" as "the messengers of God" (2 Chron 36:15-16), and to their "message" as "the Lord's message" (Hag 1:13).

It was common in the ancient Near East for a messenger of a king to introduce the king's message with a stereotyped formula, as "Thus says Ben-hadad" (1 Kgs 20:2); "Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria" (2 Kgs 18:19); or "Thus says King Cyrus of Persia" (Ezra 1:2). Naturally, then, a prophet of God, the great king of the universe, routinely introduced the message God had given him with the words, "Thus says the Lord" (1 Kgs 21:19; Isa 10:24).

2. *From the Means of Protecting A Walled City.* In the ancient Near East, peoples of various cultures built towns and cities on high hills and mountains, and erected thick walls around them for protection. They placed individuals at strategic places on these walls in "shifts" to watch all activities taking place outside the city so that the city might not be penetrated by surprise. When one of these individuals saw a sign of danger, he would cry out to the king or a high governmental official nearby (2 Sam 18:24-27; Isa 21:6), or blow a trumpet in a certain manner (Amos 3:6; Jer 6:17) to warn the people in the city. This individual was called a "sentinel" or a "watchman." Metaphorically, a prophet sees beyond the earthly sphere to God's activities encroaching on the present situation, and his/her responsibility is to announce what he/she sees. Therefore, the Bible refers to a prophet as a "watchman" or "sentinel" (Ezek 3:16-21; 33:1-9). His task is to "announce" what he "sees" (what God reveals to him) to a specified audience (see Isa 21:6). Thus, he is a proclaimer of God's message.

3. *From Divination.* In his condemnation of the false

prophets of Judah, Micah announced,

The seers shall be disgraced,
and the diviners put to shame (Mic 3:7).

The synonymous parallelism here equates "seers" and "diviners." However, in vv. 5-6, Micah calls these same individuals "prophets." Furthermore, 1 Sam 9:9 explains: "the one who is now called a *prophet* was formerly called a *seer*." Micah 3:7 indicates that one of the terms used for "diviners" was "seers." A diviner was one who had special access to the unseen realm of deities. Since a prophet received divine messages to declare to designated audiences, it was natural for biblical writers to call a prophet a "seer." For example, when the Lord "showed Amos" (literally, caused Amos to see) the visions of the locusts, the drought, and the plumb line, and he proclaimed these visions at Bethel (Amos 7:1-9), Amaziah forbade him to "prophesy" any more there, addressing him as "seer" (v. 12). Again, the responsibility of a prophet was to proclaim what God showed him to a designated audience.

4. *From the Process of Refining Metals.* In the ancient Near East, skilled workers refined metals by putting them in a furnace, and increasing the heat by blowing air into the furnace with a bellows, until the alloys melted off and the pure metal (silver, gold, etc.) remained. The Lord told Jeremiah that he had made him a "tester and a refiner" among the people. Metaphorically, his message was like increasing the heat in the furnace. The desired result was to remove sin from the hearts of the hearers and thus create a pure heart (Jer 6:27-30). Isaiah uses the same metaphor in describing the effect of God's word on the hearts of the hearers (Isa 1:22, 25). Again, the task of the prophet is to proclaim God's message to a specified audience.²

²See H. H. Rowley, "The Nature of Old Testament Prophecy in the Light of Recent Study," *HTR* 38 (1945): 1-38; *Idem*, *The Servant of the Lord and other Essays on the Old Testament* (2nd ed., rev.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1965): 97-134. R. B. Y. Scott, *The Relevance of the Prophets* (rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan, 1968): 1-17, concludes:

C. *Biblical Portrayals of Prophets' Activities*. A study of the activities of OT prophets in the fifteen prophetic books and elsewhere shows that the basic task of a prophet was to proclaim God's message to a designated audience. In doing this, sometimes he/she spoke of *the past* (Amos 4:6-11; Hos 11:1-4); sometimes of *the present* (Isa 1:2-17; Jer 5:20-31); and sometimes of *the future* (Amos 3:14-15; Hos 9:2-6). A prophet, then, sometimes *predicted the future*; but this was not his/her basic work. "It is a common misconception of OT prophecy that it means prediction."³ Furthermore, when he/she predicted the future, that prediction was inseparably related to the needs and circumstances of the audience he/she was presently addressing. Sometimes a prophet had an ecstatic experience (1 Sam 10:9-13; 19:20-24), but this is not what made that person a prophet. "Divine inspiration was what made a person a prophet. . . . The prophet is the one who can speak in the name of God."⁴

2. *Huldah the Prophetess*

2 Kgs 22:1-23:27 and 2 Chron 34:1-35:19 report Josiah's reform of all the pagan religious practices which his grandfather Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1-18) and his father Ammon (2 Kgs 21:19-26) had promoted in Judah. After continuing in the sinful ways of his ancestors for eight years, Josiah began to seek Yahweh, and in the twelfth year of his reign he began to remove some of the sinful practices they had fostered (2 Chron 34:3). In the eighteenth year of his reign, he ordered his people to repair the temple, which Manasseh and Ammon had allowed to degenerate badly (2 Kgs 22:3-7).

³"The prophets of Israel . . . were spokesmen of a living Word from God" (13). See further Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969 [first published in 1962]): 20-22; and Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983): 35-38.

⁴John L. McKenzie, S. J., "Prophet, Prophecy," *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1965): 698.

⁵John J. Schmitt, "Prophecy (Pseuxitic Hebrew)," *ABD* 5 (1992): 482.

In the course of this repair work, the priest Hilkiah found a copy of "the book of the law" in the temple, and sent it by Shaphan the secretary to read to Josiah. Josiah was horrified by its message, which announced curses on those who engaged in the very religious practices taking place in Jerusalem at the time; and he sent five of his men to "inquire of the Lord" for him "concerning the words of the book that has been found" (vv. 8-13). These men *naturally and routinely* went to the "prophetess Huldah." She instructed them to tell Josiah that Yahweh would bring disaster on Jerusalem because of the idolatrous practices taking place there; however, Josiah would not experience this disaster because he repented and humbled himself when Shaphan read the book to him and he heard Huldah's message (2 Kgs 22:14-20; 2 Chron 34:22-28).⁵

Huldah fits the biblical definition and description of a prophet. 1) The Bible calls her a "prophetess" (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chron 34:22). 2) She introduces her words with a messenger formula: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel" (2 Kgs 22:15, 18; 2 Chron 34:22, 26); "Thus says the Lord" (2 Kgs 22:16; 2 Chron 34:22, 26); and "says the Lord" (2 Kgs 22:19; 2 Chron 34:27). 3) Josiah sends his men to her to "inquire of the Lord" (2 Kgs 22:13, 18; 2 Chron 34:21, 26).⁶ 1 Sam 28:6 indicates it was a common practice for kings to "inquire of the Lord" by sending to a prophet. 4) Huldah speaks God's message with the same authority and assurance as her male counterparts (2 Kgs 22:16-20; 2 Chron 34:24-28). 5) Her message that Yahweh is going

⁵On the structure of Huldah's oracle, see Simon J. de Vries, "The Forms of Prophetic Address in Chronicles," *HAR* 10 (1986): 22-24.

⁶Appealing to parallels in Esarhaddon's "Black Stone" and Nabonidus' "Cylinder Inscription," Lowell K. Handy, "The Role of Huldah in Josiah's Cult Reform," *ZAW* 106 (1994): 40-53, describes Huldah as a "double-check" for Josiah, who already knew that the book that Hilkiah had found contained the genuine word of God. However, it may be that Josiah was fearful when he realized it *might* be the genuine word of God, and he sent his men to inquire of the Lord to see if this was indeed the case.

to punish Judah for abandoning him to worship other gods (2 Kgs 22:15-16; 2 Chron 34:24-25) is a common theme of OT prophets (see e.g., Hos 2:13; Isa 2:8, 18, 20-21; Ezek 8:1-18). 6) Her assurance that Yahweh will bless the penitent and humble of heart (2 Kgs 22:19; 2 Chron 34:27) agrees with prophetic assurances elsewhere in Scripture (cf. e.g., Isa 57:15; Mic 6:8; Jer 18:7-8). 7) 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles present Huldah as a true prophetess of Yahweh, whose word was reliable and authoritative for the king and all the people of Judah (2 Kgs 22:13, 19; 2 Chron 34:21, 27).

The biblical text indicates that Huldah had already been established as a well-known spokeswoman of Yahweh some time before Josiah sent to inquire of Yahweh, because the men whom Josiah sent apparently thought of her immediately as the proper "prophet" to approach.⁷ Phipps⁸ notes:

The biblical text does not suggest that seeking divine revelation from a woman was in any way unusual. Modern readers might be amazed that a male high priest and a male secretary of state would be part of a group seeking expert knowledge from a woman, but the ancient historian does not express surprise at the situation.

Since the authors of Kings and Chronicles view her as a true prophet of Yahweh, it is very likely that she was one of the prophets who condemned Manasseh for desecrating the temple and bringing all kinds of pagan practices into Judah and Jerusalem (2 Kgs 21:10-15; 2 Chron 33:18). Scholars have identified Huldah as a cult prophet (a prophet who functioned in an official capacity in the Jerusalem temple)⁹ or

⁷See J. I. Reeve and R. K. Harrison, "Huldah," *JSBE*, 2.774.

⁸William E. Phipps, "A Woman Was the First to Declare Scripture Holy," *BibRev* 6:2 (1990): 14-15, 44. See further Arlene Swidler, "In Search of Huldah," *TBT* 98 (1978): 1783.

⁹Ivan Engnell, "Huldah," *Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk* (Stockholm: Nordiska Uppslagsböcker, 1962): 1.col. 988; John Priest,

a court prophet (a prophet who was always available to the king and high officials for consultation).¹⁰ Either or both of these is possible, but neither should be taken to mean that Huldah spoke what the worshippers who frequented the temple or the king and royal court wanted to hear. On the contrary, the biblical text relates that she proclaimed a message announcing the fall of Jerusalem and of the temple because of the sins of God's people who lived and worshiped there.¹¹

"Huldah's Oracle," *VT* 30 (1980): 366-68.

¹⁰Pauline A. Viviano, "Huldah," *ABD*, 3.321.

¹¹Scholars regard 2 Kgs 22-23 as pivotal chapters for some major critical issues in OT study. The literature on these chapters is immense, and cannot be listed here. Huldah's promise to Josiah that he would be gathered to his grave "in peace" (2 Kgs 22:20) is a vital text in scholarly research, because in fact Josiah was killed in battle at Megiddo by the Egyptians under Pharaoh Neco (2 Kgs 23:29-30; 2 Chron 35:20-25). This has led several scholars to conclude that the Books of Kings (or the Deuteronomistic History, i.e. Deuteronomy-2 Kings) were produced in two editions: 1) the first edition would have been written before Josiah was killed in battle (609 BC) by someone who knew of Huldah's promise but wrote before Josiah died; 2) the second edition would have been written by someone living after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and carried the Jews into exile (587 BC), and after Evil-merodach, king of Babylon, set Jehoiachin, king of Judah, free from prison in the thirty-seventh year of his exile (561 BC), and even after Jehoiachin's death, since 2 Kings 25 relates these events as already having occurred. However, this does not explain why both Huldah's promise and Josiah's death in battle are in the present text of 2 Kings, apparently without any embarrassment to the writer who preserved the accounts of both. Christopher T. Begg's, *1 and 2 Kings* (NIBC; Englewood Cliffs: Prentiss Hall, 1990): 184, explanation of the phrase "in peace" is compelling: "The expression need not mean that Josiah is to die a natural death, as in fact he does not (see 23:29). Even though he was killed in combat, Josiah can still be said to have died peacefully, since he was spared witnessing the annihilation of his nation." On this complex issue, see F. Horst, "Die Kulturreform des Königs Josias," *ZDMG* 77 (1923): 220-38; Alfred Jepsen, "Die Reform des Josias," *Festschrift für A. Baumgärtel* (Berlin: A. Töpelmann, 1959): 97-108; M. Sekine, "Beobachtungen zu der josianischen Reform," *VT* 22 (1972): 361-68; M. Rose, "Bemerkungen zum historischen Fundament des Josia-Bildes in II Reg. 22 ff.," *ZA W*

3. Other Biblical Prophetesses

Huldah is but one of many prophetesses mentioned in Scripture.¹²

A. *Miriam*. Exod 15:19-21 states that after Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and drivers went into the sea, and the Lord brought back the waters of the sea upon them, while the Israelites walked through the sea on dry land, "the prophetess" Miriam took a tambourine and summoned her audience to praise the Lord in song because he had triumphed gloriously over the Egyptians. The sequence of thought is the same as in Exod 14:22-15:18: The Egyptian horses, chariots, and drivers pursued the Israelites into the sea (14: 22-25), the waters of the sea returned and covered them so that none escaped (14:26-28), the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea (14: 29-31), and Moses and the Israelites praised the Lord in song because he had triumphed gloriously over the Egyptians (15:1-18). Exod 15:1 and 15:21 are identical except that the singer in 15:1 says, "I will sing to the Lord," whereas the singer in 15:21 summons her hearers, "Sing to the Lord."

Several think these are two different songs, probably having come into the present text from two originally

89 (1977): 50-63; A. D. H. Mayes, "King and Covenant: A Study of 2 Kings 22-23," *Hermathena* 125 (1978): 34-47; Christopher Levin, "Joschia im deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk," *ZAW* 96 (1984): 312-43; N. Lohfink, "The Cult Reform of Josiah of Judah: 2 Kings 22-23 as a Source for the History of Israelite Religion," *Ancient Israelite Religion. Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. P. D. Miller, Jr., P. D. Hanson and S. D. McBride, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987): 459-75; Pierluice Tagliacarne, "Keiner war wie er," *Untersuchung zur Struktur von 2 Konige 22-23* (ATAT 31; St. Othilien: EOS, 1989): xi + 473; C. Conroy, "Reflections on the Exegetical Task: Apropos of Recent Studies on 2 Kings 22-23," *Pentateuchal and Deuteronomistic Studies. Papers Read at the XIIIth IOSOT Congress, Leuven 1989* (BETL 94; Leuven: Leuven Univ. Press/Peeters, 1990): 255-68.

¹²For a discussion of Huldah and several of the women mentioned below from a positive point of view, see Maria Eugenia Lirarte, "Mujer y ministerio: Antiguo Testamento," *Biblia y Fe* 16 (1990): 29-50.

different sources. However, Janzen¹³ has suggested that 15:19 is a narrative device called "analepsis" (the temporary withholding of vital information in favor of its belated introduction later for one effect or another). "Them" in v. 21 is a masculine pronoun in Hebrew, and therefore does not refer to the women (or, at least, the women alone) in v. 20. The imperative "Sing" in v. 21 is also masculine plural. Janzen suggests that Miriam led the people of Israel through the whole hymn, and that Moses and the Israelites (15:1), led by the dancing women (15:20), responded antiphonally to her lead. The process followed this pattern: Miriam called on Moses and the Israelites to sing to the Lord (15:21); then Moses and the Israelites responded, "I will sing to the Lord" (15:1).

Whether this is the correct interpretation or not, Exod 15:19-21 shows that Miriam was a prophetess, and that she called on her fellows to praise God in song to celebrate his victory over the Egyptians. In harmony with this portrait of Miriam, "the prophet Micah (6:4) regards her as a divinely commissioned leader alongside Moses and Aaron during the wilderness journey."¹⁴ The Lord spoke through her just as he spoke through Moses and Aaron (Num 12:2).

B. *Deborah*. The author of Judges refers to Deborah as "judge" (4:4-5), "mother in Israel" (5:7), and "prophetess" (4:4).¹⁵ As prophetess, Deborah declared to Barak that the Lord commanded him to go to Mount Tabor with warriors from the tribes of Naphtali and Zebulun, and promised that the Lord would give Sisera into his hand (4:6-7). Her actions here are parallel to those of other prophets, like Samuel, when he instructed Saul utterly to destroy the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:2-3); Shemaiah, when he told Rehoboam not to fight against Jeroboam I and the Israelites

¹³J. Gerald Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: Who is Seconding Whom?" *CBQ* 54 (1992): 211-20 (quote on 214).

¹⁴Rita J. Burns, "Miriam," *ABD* 4.870.

¹⁵Similarly, Samuel was a "priest" (1 Sam 2:18; 7:9-10; 9:11-13, 22-24), a "judge" (1 Sam 7:6, 15-17), and a "prophet" (1 Sam 3:20; 9:6-10; 19:20) at the same time.

as he had planned (1 Kgs 12:21-24); and Micah, when he warned Ahab that if he fought against Ben-hadad of Syria at Ramoth-gilead he would be killed (1 Kgs 22:15-28). When Barak refused to go without her, Deborah accompanied him to the battleground (vv. 8-10).¹⁶ Deborah's role as a "mother in Israel" corroborates her role as a prophet. Based on the function of a "mother" depicted throughout Scripture, the meaning here is that Deborah protected (see Gen. 21:14-19; Exod 2:2-4), provided security for (see Prov. 31:15, 21, 27-28), counseled (see Gen 27:42-45), and taught (see Prov 31:26; 2 Tim 1:5; 3:14-15) God's people.¹⁷

Like Miriam "the prophetess" (Exod 15:20), she (along with Barak) composed and sang a hymn praising Yahweh for giving the Israelites the victory over the Canaanites under Jabin and Sisera (Judg 5:1). The direct addresses to Deborah (vv. 7, 12) and to Barak (v. 12) in this hymn, and the references to Deborah and Barak in the third person (v. 15) suggest that Deborah, Barak, and the Israelites sang this song antiphonally, perhaps like the song of Miriam.¹⁸

As God's prophetess, Deborah proclaimed God's word to Barak, and went with him to battle. When God gave the Israelites the victory, she composed and sang a song praising him for his power and guidance.

C. *The "Prophetess" Mentioned in Isa 8:3.* In relating the third "sign" which he gave Ahaz to discourage him from sending to Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria for help against the Syro-Ephraimite attack under Rezin and Pekah and to trust in Yahweh,¹⁹ Isaiah says:

¹⁶See Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 & 5," *JAAAR* 58 (1990): 389-411.

¹⁷See J. Cheryl Exum, "'Mother in Israel': A Familiar Figure Reconsidered," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Lety Russell; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985): 73-85.

¹⁸See Clarence J. Vos, *Woman in Old Testament Worship* (Delft: Judels & Brinkman, 1968): 179-80.

¹⁹The first "sign" was that of Shear-jashub (Isa 7:3-9), and the

I went to *the prophetess*, and she conceived and bore a son. Then the Lord said to me, "Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz" (Isa 8:3).

"The prophetess" here is clearly Isaiah's wife.²⁰

But it is most unlikely that he uses that title for her just because she is his wife. . . . It is possible that Isaiah's wife, as Huldah at the time of Jeremiah (see 2 Kings 22:14), might have held the position of cultic prophetess at the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Since Isaiah placed high value on the temple, in spite of the hesitations which he expressed about the cultic piety, it is certainly not an impossibility.²¹

There can be little doubt that Isaiah's wife was a prophetess in her own right, and that she performed her God-given role of proclaiming God's message to designated audiences as needs and opportunities presented themselves, just as did Deborah, Huldah, and her own husband.

D. *The False Prophetesses Rebuked by Ezekiel.* Ezek 13 relates Ezekiel's oracles against the prophets (vv. 1-16) and prophetesses (vv. 17-23) of Judah. Ezekiel denounces them for essentially the same sins, i.e., they "prophesy out of

second was that of Immanuel (Isa 7:10-17) (compare Isa 8:18, which refers to all three "signs" as being "from Yahweh of hosts who dwells on Mount Zion").

²⁰See J. J. M. Roberts, "Isaiah and His Children," *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* (ed. A. Kort and S. Morschauser; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1985): 198.

²¹Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary* (trans. T. H. Trapp; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991 [originally published in German in 1980]): 337. See also I. Hylander, "War Jesaja Nabi?" *Le Monde Oriental* 25 (1931): 53-56; C. B. Reynolds, "Isaiah's Wife," *JTS* 36 (1935): 182-85; A. Jepsen, "Die Nebiah in Jes 8:3," *ZAW* 72 (1960): 267-68; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39* (NICOT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986): 222-23; and Phyllis Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cults," *Ancient Israelite Religion. Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. P. D. Miller, Jr., P. D. Hanson, and S. D. McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987): 404, 415 n. 29.

their own imagination, "Hear the word of the Lord!" (vv. 2, 17), and they practice divination (magic, fortune-telling) and lying (vv. 6-9, 18-23). Therefore, God "is against them" (vv. 8-9, 20) and will punish them (vv. 11-15, 20-21); thus, he says, "you shall know that I am the Lord" (vv. 9, 14, 21, 23).

This text assumes that both prophets and prophetesses were at work among God's people in the days of Ezekiel. Some (undoubtedly the majority) of them were false prophets; they pretended to proclaim God's message, when in reality they were proclaiming what the people wanted to hear so that they could benefit therefrom (see vv. 10, 16, 18-23). The similarity in wording and thought between Ezekiel's denunciation of false prophets and prophetesses, and the denunciation of false prophets by Micah (3:5-8) and Jeremiah (23:9-40), suggests that the term "prophets" in the latter passages is comprehensive, including both men and women.

E. *Noadiah*. Nehemiah reports that one scheme which his enemies Tobiah and Sanballat had contrived against him was to hire the prophet Shemaiah to persuade Nehemiah to barricade himself in the Jerusalem temple to prevent his enemies from killing him, but Nehemiah refused (Neh 6:10-14). Then Nehemiah prays that God will punish Tobiah and Sanballat for doing this, as well as "the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets" who wanted to make him afraid (v. 14).

Noadiah is a false prophetess. But Nehemiah does not indicate any reservation about women prophesying; in fact, he speaks of Noadiah "and the rest of the prophets." Rather, his concern is that Noadiah proclaimed a message God had not authorized her to proclaim, and her purpose in declaring this message was unbecoming of a true prophet of God, viz., to demoralize Nehemiah.

F. *Anna*. Luke relates that when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the Jerusalem temple to present him to the Lord (Luke 2:22), an eighty-four year old "prophetess" named

Anna approached. She was a woman who worshiped at the temple constantly, fasting and participating in the prayers of the people attending the daily sacrifice (v. 37; see Luke 1:10). Upon seeing Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, Anna began to "praise God" and to "speak about the child (Jesus) to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38). The Greek verb translated "speak" here is in the imperfect, which indicates continual action. Thus, the text means that Anna spoke about the child on this occasion and on numerous later occasions, as opportunities presented themselves.²²

Anna's actions here provide another example that the Bible understands a prophet(ess) as one who speaks God's message to a designated audience. The inspired author, Luke, clearly commends Anna to his readers for doing this.

G. *The Prophetesses at Pentecost*. After the Holy Spirit came in Jerusalem on the first Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection, and there was confusion among the multitudes of Jews who had come to the festival, Peter addressed the people. He began by affirming that the events which were taking place on this occasion were spoken beforehand by the prophet Joel (2:28-32):

In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall

prophesy . . .
Even upon my slaves, both men and women
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy (Acts 2:17-18).

One must assume that the Holy Spirit fell on both "men and women" on this occasion and that both men and women "prophesied," i.e., proclaimed God's message to a specified audience.²³

²²See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX* (AB 28; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981): 431.

²³See Allen Black, "Women in the Gospel of Luke," *Essays on*

H. *Philip's Four Virgin Daughters*. Luke says that "Philip the evangelist" (see Acts 6:5; 8:4-13, 26-40) had four virgin daughters "who had the gift of prophecy" (Acts 21:8-9 NRSV; lit. "virgin prophesying daughters"). They are evidence that the gift of prophecy was a privilege of women in the early church (see 1 Cor 11:5; Rev 2:20) and that the practice of prophecy among women evident in the OT was again manifested (e.g., 2 Kgs 22:14; Neh 6:14). In Acts, these four prophetesses demonstrate the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that in the latter days the Spirit of God would be poured out on the daughters of Israel (2:14-21; Joel 2:28).²⁴

I. *The Prophetesses at Corinth*. In 1 Cor 11:4-5, Paul refers to both men and women praying (i.e., leading public prayer) and prophesying (i.e., proclaiming God's word to a designated audience) in the assemblies of the church at Corinth (see also v. 13). He expresses no qualms about the divine acceptability of both women and men leading public prayer and proclaiming God's word in the public assembly, but he is concerned that some of the men are doing this with their heads covered, and that some of the women were doing it with their heads uncovered (vv. 4-7, 10, 13-15). Even though it may be impossible for modern readers to appreciate fully why this concerned Paul, the context shows that in the cultural situation at Corinth in the first century, if a man covered his head while praying or prophesying, he dishonored his "head," Christ (vv. 3, 7); whereas if a woman did not cover her head with a veil while praying or prophesying, she dishonored her "head," i.e., her husband (vv. 3, 5).²⁵

It is instructive that Paul teaches here that a woman can lead prayer or prophesy (proclaim God's message) in the public assembly of the church *and at the same time* honor

Women in Earliest Christianity (ed. C. D. Osburn; Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993): 1.456-68.

²⁴JoAnn Ford Watson, "Philip (Person)," *ABD* 5.311-12.

²⁵See Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Hermeneia; trans. J. W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975 [originally published in German in 1969]): 181-91.

and be in subjection to her husband. Orr and Walther²⁶ sum up Paul's teaching here pointedly and succinctly:

There is no question that women were engaging in prayer and prophecy in public worship in Corinth. . . . The specific problem that elicits the theological analysis of the relationship between men and women has to do with how women should be attired and particularly how they should wear their hair when taking part in worship leadership. Paul is trying to ensure that the appearance of women in the church concurs with acceptable standards of decency and order. . . . It is probable that Paul has in mind married women throughout. . . . The heart of his argument seems to be that just as the man stands before God uncovered because of his spiritual subordination to Christ, so the woman should stand veiled because of her spiritual subordination to her husband. Probably her veiling is an indication of her married state, which reflects her relationship to her husband; and this ought not to be put aside for any reason . . . because it would be a reflection upon her husband A woman who participates in Corinthian worship leadership *ought* to exercise her freedom responsibly The wife ought to lead in public worship in such a way (with such traditional decorum) that she will not bring disgrace or dishonor to her husband. Presumably the principle would apply to unmarried women, *mutatis mutandis*.

²⁶William F. Orr and James Arthur Walter, *1 Corinthians* (AB 32; Garden City: Doubleday, 1976): 263-64. See the summary of views in Mark Black, "1 Cor 11:2-16—A Re-investigation," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, 1.191-218.

4. *Summary*

OT and NT passages which refer to prophetesses agree in a remarkable way. They demonstrate and/or assume that a prophet is an individual who proclaims God's message to a designated audience, and that God used both men and women to perform this function—in Israel and in the church. One should take these texts into consideration, for instance, when interpreting 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:8-15, which instruct women to be silent in the church. Concord between the OT and the NT exists when one realizes that in 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:8-15 Paul's instructions are not universal for all churches in all ages, but pertain to specific situations that had arisen among the people to whom Paul was writing. Osburn²⁷ has argued cogently that this is the case in 1 Cor 14: 34-35:

Far from being intolerant, Paul neither teaches nor suggests in this text anything regarding patriarchy or female subjection. The real issue is not the *extent* to which a woman may participate in the work and worship of the church, but the *manner*. Paul's corrective does not ban women from speaking in public, but stops the disruptive verbal misconduct of certain wives who are giving free rein to "irresistible impulses" to "pipe up" at will with questions in the assembly. . . .

Similarly, Geer²⁸ contends correctly that Paul's concern in 1 Tim 2:8-15 is not that women might have authority over men in the church but that certain assertive women in the church who had been influenced by false teachers would teach error. For this reason, he charges them to "be silent."

²⁷Carroll D. Osburn, "The Interpretation of 1 Cor 14:34-35," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* (ed. C. D. Osburn; Joplin: College Press, 1993): 1.242. For his arguments supporting this, see 219-42.

²⁸Thomas C. Geer Jr., "Admonitions to Women in 1 Tim 2:8-15," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* (ed. C. D. Osburn, Joplin: College Press, 1993): 1.281-302.

The contemporary church should take into consideration the examples of Huldah and other biblical prophetesses whose work is analogous to that of prophetesses in the churches of the NT era. Specifically, they spoke God's word to a specific audience. In this connection, they 1) were called "prophets," 2) claimed to speak from God, 3) were recognized among the believers as "prophets," 4) spoke with authority and assurance, and 5) were reliable.

Although the role and function of prophecy in our contemporary churches may differ somewhat from that in the churches of the NT era, there can be no doubt that prophetesses were an important and integral part of the life of the early church.