

Queen Messiah

The Talmudic Teaching of the Seven Women Prophets

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Women Prophets in a Rabbinical Vision of History

The Sages taught: Forty-eight prophets and seven women prophets prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people, and they neither subtracted from nor added onto what is written in the Torah introducing no changes or additions to the mitzvot, except for the reading of the Megillah which they added as an obligation for all future generations. ... Who were the seven women prophets? Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther. (B. Megillah 14a)¹

The above citation is found within the context of a sweeping messianic vision of history. The endpoint of the rabbinical understanding of history is, of course, always the salvation of the Jewish people – the redemption of Israel – and, concurrently, the redemption of humankind. But something here feels slightly different from what we might generally expect from the messianic course of history. Perhaps this variant, as this chapter will explore, explains why the rabbis focus so explicitly on women – more exactly, on seven women prophets.

These women are not just auxiliaries, subsumed under the great office of Biblical prophecy, which is mostly performed by men. They stand for themselves, on equal footing with their male colleagues, yet constituting a prophetic line of their own. The number seven is not just any digit. It is *the* holy number. Seven symbolizes completion. Seven indicates, for example, the Shabbat, the holy seventh day, which structures the sacred aspects of time and space. In the Jewish tradition, Shabbat offers a first taste of redeemed messianic time. The Torah calls not only the seventh day “Shabbat,” but also the festival of Pesach (Lev. 23:11). Accordingly, the Torah, in the two versions of the decalogue (Exod. 20: Deut. 5), provides two explanations for the commandment to keep the Sabbath. One is God’s completion of creation and his resting on the seventh day; the other is God’s leading the Israelites out of Egypt, out of the dark house of slavery, from a tight place into freedom.² Hence the path to freedom is also under the sign of seven.

¹ All translations in this paper from the Torah and rabbinic literature are based on Sefaria.org.

² The Hebrew word for Egypt, Mitzrayim, is often interpreted religiously as “doubly narrow” or “doubly oppressive”: Mi = from; ‘zar = tight; ayim = ending for something doubled.

As far as women prophets are concerned the goal of prophetic lineage must already have been reached. There are already seven women prophets, and therefore, their line has reached its end. On the men's side, there are "only" 48 prophets. If the holy number seven is also applied here, there is still one prophet missing: the 49th who would complete the sum of seven times seven. All women prophets have come, but we are still waiting for a 49th male prophet.

Most likely, he shall be the Messiah.

The rabbinic sages in the Talmud don't come to the same conclusion concerning what we should expect from him.³ Some hope for a world after the world, a veritable paradise; others are more circumspect and content themselves with a vision of the end of subjugation and oppression. Some expect God to send the Messiah without the aid of human beings. Others believe that the messianic era will arrive bit by bit when people act in a way that pleases God. Some believe in the coming of a Mashiah ben David – a direct descendent of King David. Others assume a more general rabbinical era.

Perhaps, the completed line of women prophets can give us a more accurate idea of the messianic era. Or perhaps the assignation of seven women prophets expresses a messianic conception that is different from that which Jews of the time were used to. And, this idea could only be made clear by pinpointing the messianic role of these women. One might think that the teaching of the seven women prophets simply spans a smaller version of the messianic arc represented by the 48 plus one male prophets. If that were the case, the two sides must be seen as mirroring one another – seven women prophets on one side, and 48 prophets on the other. The more easily graspable number of seven is clearer than a disparate mass of 48. And perhaps the completion of the messianic lineage in the figure of the seventh woman prophet, Esther, can give us an idea of how the attainment of the messianic era through the 49th prophet might look.

That could be the case, but I do not think so. I see no reason why the line of women prophets should exactly mirror the male line of prophecy (if such a line exists at all). Instead, I see the teaching of the seven women prophets as an additional rabbinic innovation in order to express something not yet said – an innovation necessary because it could not be said by focusing only on men prophets. Something new was being created, an independent idea that necessitated the inclusion of women. They had to be part of it! And to motivate women, they needed to be provided with authority, an authority expressed through the seven women prophets, who show that women too were needed

3 On the rabbinical controversy about what to expect from the coming of the "Messiah," see for example in the B. Sanhedrin 90aff., esp. 97aff.

to fulfil the rabbinical understanding of messianic history. The key to this new, or at least additional, understanding, I would like to propose, can be found through an awareness of the goal achieved by the seventh woman prophet, the Jewish/Persian Queen Esther, and shedding light backwards onto the other women prophets who preceded her.

In the Biblical story, Esther saves her people from Haman's attempts to obliterate them, shifting the course of the messianic scenario. The Talmudic rabbis say it themselves: while the stories of the other six prophets can be read within the framework of the Torah, they did not add a message differing from the one already found within the Torah. But with Esther, a new book with a controversial message was added to the Biblical canon: the Book of Esther. Jews are obliged to read this text on Purim.

The Sages taught: Forty-eight prophets and seven women prophets prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people, and they neither subtracted from nor added onto what is written in the Torah introducing no changes or additions to the mitzvot, except for the reading of the Megillah [the Book of Esther], which they added as an obligation for all future generations. (B. Megillah 14a)

For the rabbis, the Book of Esther was a controversial text. God does not play any ostensible role within the book.⁴ Esther's brave acts alone save the Jewish people from destruction. The fact that God made no appearance as the all-powerful lord who determines the fate of Israel was reason enough for the rabbis to hesitate to add the story to the Biblical canon. What is more, Esther was married to a Persian man, not exactly making her a good role model for Jewish girls, even if he was a king. She also had a heathen name – Astarte, Esther, Ishtar – the name of the goddess of love and war in the Mesopotamian cultures. Esther saved the Jewish people, but not in the way that they were saved from Egypt, through the outstretched arm and strong hand of God. The Babylonian Talmud grants us insight into the fact that the Book of Esther was only accepted after resistance.⁵ The rabbis deserve all the more recognition for granting it canonical status. The Books of the Maccabees, as a comparison, the foundation of the victorious story of Chanukkah and the rededication of the temple, did not make it into the Biblical canon, but were relegated by the rabbis to the apocrypha. Even more astounding than the fact that the

⁴ Elsewhere, the rabbis do see a divine presence, or rather "absence," indicated in Esther's name. It resonates for them a negative theology, as the name Esther should be understood as: "Anochi *haster astir* panai" ("Yet, I will keep my countenance hidden") (Deut. 31:18). See B. Chulin 139b.

⁵ B. Megillah 7a.

Book of Esther was incorporated into the Tanakh, the Hebrew bible, is her additional valorization through the teaching of the seven women prophets, in which Queen Esther becomes the crowning seventh prophet. I contend that the seven women prophets represent nothing less than a new messianic paradigm, a “counterprophecy” – a vision of history not necessarily opposed to but different from the widespread expectation of a Mashiah ben David, a messiah stemming from David’s lineage.

This new paradigm, culminating in the prophet Esther, is most certainly closely related to the historical situation of Jews in Persia. Esther, the Jewish Persian queen, acts as a symbol for that community. She stands for the Jewish population of Persia, so well-integrated that non-Jews did not even recognize them as Jews. When Haman tells the king about the Jewish people, who have their own laws, the king is not even aware that such a people existed in his kingdom. The Book of Esther indeed reflects a historical reality that may have also existed at the time the Babylonian Talmud was in the final editing stages – the period of the Sassanid empire in sixth and seventh century Persia. Without denying the difficulties that the Jewish population faced, the flourishing of Talmudic culture at that time was surely due to the spiritual and material prosperity that Jews in Persia were able to achieve thanks to the relatively tolerant policies of the Sassanids. Great Talmudic scholars such as Mar Samuel frequented the house of the imperial family and were able to secure far-reaching Jewish autonomy. A Jewish queen at the palace, in an alliance with a Persian king, was a politically feasible idea.

The comfortable material situation of Jews in Persia is also echoed in the larger Talmudic discussion within which the teaching of the seven women prophets appears. Even for rabbinical standards, it is an unusually long passage.⁶ The *galut*, the Jewish ‘exile’, was commonly perceived as an adverse experience. As in other Talmudic discourse on the rabbinic understanding of history, here, too, the large empires of antiquity – Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia – are described in the main as doing violence against Israel and bringing exile and suffering to the Jews. But strikingly, the discussion also reflects another kind of Jewish life in exile. It is called “abundance” (*revaya*) and indicates an era of economic prosperity that provided satisfaction of all basic needs, even comfort and room for celebration:

Rabbi Ḥanina bar Pappa introduced this passage with an introduction from here: “You have caused men to ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; but You brought us out into abundance” (Ps. 66:12). “Through fire”; this

6 B. Megillah 9b-17a.

was in the days of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar who cast the righteous into the furnace. “And through water”; this was in the days of Pharaoh who decreed that all newborn males be cast into the water. “But You brought us out into abundance”; this was in the days of Haman where abundant feasts played a pivotal role in their peril and salvation. (B. Megillah 11a)

Yet abundance here is not necessarily only positive for the Jews. Life under prosperous conditions has its own dangers. Clearly, the Babylonian Talmud is referring in this verse to those contemporary readers who have settled into relatively convenient situations in the Jewish diaspora, such as the Jews in Persia.

By bestowing the status of the seventh woman prophet onto the Jewish/Persian Queen Esther, the rabbis show their awareness of the specific historical situation, which necessitates a messianic paradigm different from that of other eras of oppression and poverty. Not only is there no mention of God in the Book of Esther, but the salvation of the Jews in this story does not fit into the usual messianic logic. The messianic celebration at the end of the story, after Haman and his followers have been defeated, is not because the Jews have returned or will return to the land of Israel. In fact, there is no mention of a return at all. Rather, they celebrate because they have improved their status within Persian society. It is nothing less than a step toward emancipation. The diaspora ceases to be only exile. And all of that is represented by a woman – Queen Esther. Politically speaking, Esther, stands for the positive potential of a diasporic Jewish life. Her status as the seventh prophet offers a female alternative to male prophetic perspectives, which envision the re-establishment of a Jewish state or a re-building of the Temple in Jerusalem, both institutions represented by male hierarchies.⁷ Naturally, this messianic alternative would not be possible without female protagonists.

The Seven Women at First Biblical Glance

Let us begin by examining the first six women prophets and looking for shared characteristics that might substantiate the thesis of an intrinsic line of prophecy.⁸

⁷ This fits well with those theories that connote the diasporic experience of the Jews, especially Jewish men, as feminine. See for example Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora*; Braun and Brumlik, *Handbuch jüdische Studien*, 255–76; esp., Ist Israel weiblich? Die Grundlehre des Judentums in der Konstruktion der Geschlechter, 257–261.

⁸ I can highly recommend on this topic Brenner, *The Israelite Woman*.

Sarah – Miriam – Deborah – Hannah – Abigail – Huldah

Each one of these women represents a Biblical era.

- Sarah evokes the beginning in the era of the patriarchs and matriarchs in the Book of Genesis.
- Miriam embodies the time of nation-building starting with the Book of Exodus, as she belonged to the generation that was rescued from slavery in Egypt and received the Torah at Sinai.
- Deborah stands for the era of the Judges and the decentralized Israelite tribes in the land of Canaan.
- Hannah lived at the cusp of the political transition from a nation of tribes ruled by God alone to a kingdom united under the Kings – Saul and David – anointed by Hannah's son Samuel.
- Abigail represented the final embracing of the kingdom by turning away from her husband, the landowner Nabal, and marrying David, the future king.
- Huldah supported King Josiah in establishing a central administration with Jerusalem and the temple at its heart, although she knew of the end of the Jewish kingdom and the coming of the Babylonian exile.

Esther perfectly completes the paradigm shift inherent to this line of women prophets. She becomes a queen positioned within the Babylonian (Persian) exile.

It is clear that the Talmudic rabbis deliberately constructed the teaching of the seven women prophets so that it could make a statement that goes beyond the information found within the Tanakh. That it truly is an innovative construct can be seen in the simple fact that four of the seven women prophets are not designated as such in the Tanakh. It was the rabbis who elevated them to the status of prophets. Of the seven women, only Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah are explicitly called *nevia* – woman prophet – in the bible.

- “And Miriam the prophet, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand.” (Exod. 15:20)
- “Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophet; she led Israel at that time.” (Judg. 4:4)
- “So the priest Hilkiah, and Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophet Huldah – the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah son of Harhas, the keeper of the wardrobe – who was living in Jerusalem in the Mishneh, and they spoke to her.” (2 Kings 22:14)

The fact that the Talmud adds four more women, calling each one a prophet, shows that the rabbis were creatively constructing a prophetic vision of history by drawing on the proven principle of seven. They could have composed a line

of twelve. The number four would also have been imaginable for a feminine construct, corresponding with the four mothers (Sarah, Rebekkah, Leah and Rachel). But the rabbis chose the principle of seven. There can be no other reason than the fact that seven – like the Shabbat – has overtones of a messianic dimension.⁹ Seven women are connected to build a line of messianic salvation. Although not called prophets in the Tanakh, Sarah, Hannah, Abigail, and Esther were all very important female Biblical figures. It is easy to imagine that Sarah and Hannah, the first two, were revered as prophets. In the case of Abigail and even more so in the case of Esther, the connection is less obvious, at least at first Biblical glance.

Let us first look at the three women that each are explicitly denoted as “prophet” in the bible: Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah. Unlike the male prophets, there is no mention in the Tanakh that any of these women were appointed as prophets by God. They were prophets of their own accord. Neither does the bible give any reason for what makes them prophets. They simply are. In contrast to the Tanakh, the Talmudic rabbis do substantiate their claims, justifying what makes each of these women a prophet. And through the line that the rabbis thus create, they make it possible to subtly indicate a suppressed moment in the history of Israel. Their messianic alternative enables a critical inner-Jewish awareness of those who were made invisible, but nevertheless existed. But we shall return to that in the next section.

Let us begin by noting the shared characteristics of the first six women prophets as can be extrapolated at a first glance into the Tanakh. Each of these women had a moment in her life where she stood up in opposition to a male authority who had a direct influence over her.

- Sarah rejects Abraham’s relationship with her maid, Hagar, and Ismail, their son. She demands that Abraham send the two of them away. God supports Sarah and tells Abraham to listen to her: “In all that Sarah has said to you, hearken to her voice.” (Gen. 21:12)
- Miriam resists Pharaoh’s murderous decree by setting her baby brother into the river in a basket so that he may be saved by Pharaoh’s daughter: “And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him.” (Exod. 2:4)
- Deborah warns General Barak that although he will win the battle against Sisera, he will not be its hero. That honor will be reserved for a woman, namely Yael the Kenite: “Very well, I [Deborah] will go with you [Barak],” she answered. ‘However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are

9 This also applies to the Seven Noahide Commandments, ensuring a place in the messianic world to come for all non-Jews who keep the Noahide standards (see B. Sanhedrin 56a).

taking, for then the Eternal will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” (Judg. 4:9)

- Hannah does not listen to her husband, who believes that his devotion to her is more important than her desire for a child, even more important than “seven sons.” She goes again to the sanctuary, this time alone, to pray to God. Her prayer is answered and she gives birth to Samuel, who will later become high priest. (1 Sam. 1–2)
- Abigail looks down on her husband and takes the opportunity of his conflict with David to change sides. (1 Sam. 25)
- Huldah self-assuredly speaks with King Josiah’s emissaries. She shows no respect, calling him only “the man” and lets him know that his demise is coming. (2 Kings 22)

Admittedly, the rabbis are very critical of the self-confidence of these women. In their discussion of the teachings of the seven women prophets, they are especially harsh in their opinion of Deborah and Huldah.

Rav Naḥman said: Haughtiness is not befitting a woman. And a proof to this is that there were two haughty women, whose names were identical to the names of loathsome creatures. One, Deborah, was called a hornet, as her Hebrew name, Devorah, means hornet; and one, Huldah, was called a marten, as her name is the Hebrew term for that creature. From where is it known that they were haughty? With regard to Deborah, the hornet, it is written: “And she sent and called Barak” (Jud. 4:6), but she herself did not go to him. And with regard to Huldah, the marten, it is written: “Say to the man that sent you to me” (2 Kings 22:15), but she did not say: Say to the king. (B. Megillah 14b)

But the rabbinical criticism of Deborah’s and Huldah’s “haughtiness” does not diminish their prophetic status. It does not matter that the women do not exhibit the modest and reserved behavior that patriarchal values demand of them. Rather, these seven women are distinguished by their exceptional expressiveness. Sarah “laughs,” not a joyful laugh, but a skeptical and suffering laugh. Miriam and Deborah, two of the figures named as women prophets in the bible, “sing” when they rejoice that their prophecies came true. Hannah “prays” loudly and emotionally. Abigail and Huldah “speak,” drastically and bluntly, they completely disregard power and honor in their defense of the truth. The general standards to which women are held are not important in their cases. Whether or not they are mothers or have borne sons is of no account. Although she is called “a mother in Israel,” no children of Deborah are mentioned in the Tanakh. Miriam’s maternal status is unclear. Perhaps Horus was her son? But then who was her husband? It is also not written that Huldah had any children, nor, later, Esther.

Rabbinical Justifications for the Prophetic Status of Women in the Tanakh

The line connecting all seven Biblical women in a messianic prophetic lineage is only conceivable as a rabbinic creation. And its originality can only be uncovered by examining the reasons given by the rabbis for the prophetic status of the seven Biblical women. Again, I shall look only at the first six women prophets and discuss Esther separately in the following section.

The explanations of why, from a Talmudic viewpoint, the respective women are accorded the status of prophet are surprisingly different from what we might assume at first Biblical glance. In their exegesis, the rabbis do not derive the prophetic moment for each woman from the narratives of their stories, but from hermeneutic interpretations of the plain text. In their *Pardes*, or Biblical hermeneutics, the rabbis in these cases take the approach of *remez* – the unexpected sign that reveals a hidden, additional meaning within a word or sentence.¹⁰

To establish Sarah's prophetic legacy, the rabbis equate her with Iscah.

Sarah, as it is written: "Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah" (Gen. 11:29). And Rabbi Yitzhak said: Iscah is in fact Sarah. And why was she called Iscah? For she saw [*sakhta*] by means of divine inspiration, as it is stated: "In all that Sarah has said to you, hearken to her voice" (Gen. 21:12). Alternatively, Sarah was also called Iscah, for all gazed [*sokhin*] upon her beauty. (B. Megillah 14a)

On the surface, Iscah is introduced in the Tanakh as Sarah's cousin or perhaps even half-sister (Gen. 11:29). But the rabbis interpret the name "Iscah" as denoting Sarah's prophetic attribute. In the Torah, Iscah is part of the branch of Abraham's family who remained in Haran – in the northern area of Paddan Aram – and did not go with Abraham further south to Canaan. We can only try to unravel the reasons why the rabbis began the teaching of the seven women prophets by equating Sarah and Iscah. I surmise that it has something to do with the Aramaic culture, the apex of which includes the Babylonian Talmud, written mostly in Aramaic. Equating Sarah and Iscah points beyond the land of Canaan toward Haran and Paddan Aram – toward the Aramaic culture out of which Abraham and the children of Israel emerged. Iscah provides Sarah with another, more international side. For the Talmudic rabbis, it also explains Sarah's exceptional beauty.

10 *Pardes*, or *PaRDeS*, is an acronym of the four rabbinical approaches to Biblical exegesis: *P*, *p'shat*, the simple or explicit meaning; *R*, *remez*, the hidden or alluded meaning; *D*, *d'rash*, the interpretation; and *S*, *sod*, the mystical and secret meaning (B. Chagigah 14b).

The rabbinical explanations for Miriam are easier to understand since her status as prophet is discussed in more detail. Unlike Sarah, she is explicitly called a prophet in the Torah:

And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand.
(Exod. 15:20).

Here, too, the rabbis first look at Miriam's name, or rather the fact that she is linked to Aaron and called "Aaron's sister." Was she really Moses's sister? the rabbis seem to wonder. Her name, Miriam, is told only relatively late in the Torah, namely, in the moment when Pharaoh's horses and riders are drowning in the sea. There she is called "Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron." Earlier in the narrative, it states only that Moses had a "sister," whose name is not given.

[The Gemara asks: Was she the sister only of Aaron,] and not the sister of Moses? Why does the verse mention only one of her brothers? Rav Nahman said that Rav said: For she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron, i.e., she prophesied since her youth, even before Moses was born, and she would say: My mother is destined to bear a son who will deliver the Jewish people to salvation. And at the time when Moses was born the entire house was filled with light, and her father stood and kissed her on the head, and said to her: My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled.¹¹ (B. Megillah 14a)

Much more so than in the case of Sarah or the other women prophets, the rabbis emphasize a distinguishing moment in which Miriam proved to be a true prophet. She was able to see the salvatory, messianic scenario in its entirety.

But once Moses was cast into the river, her father arose and rapped her on the head, saying to her: My daughter, where is your prophecy now, as it looked as though the young Moses would soon meet his end. This is the meaning of that which is written with regard to Miriam's watching Moses in the river: "And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him" (Exod. 2:4), i.e., to know what would be with the end of her prophecy, as she had prophesied that her brother was destined to be the savior of the Jewish people. (B. Megillah 14a)

11 Incidentally, a direct connection can be made here to Mary in the New Testament and to Mary in the Koran. In the Koran, Maryam—the mother of Jesus—is called the "sister of Aaron." Mary in the New Testament is aware of the nativity, the messianic hope of the birth of a child. Her namesake Miriam set the paradigm "My mother will give birth to a child that will be the redeemer of the Jewish people" (Shemot Rabbah 1:23). In the New Testament, it is Mary herself who brings the savior into the world. Nevertheless, it is the same figure. This should lead us to consider whether Mary in the Gospels and Maryam in the Koran are derived from Miriam.

For Miriam, standing at a distance and seeing from afar is the key prophetic moment. She sees not only that her baby brother is saved by Pharaoh's daughter on the other bank of the river, but in this prism of personal salvation, she sees the salvation of the Jews as a whole.

In the case of Deborah, while she is also called a "prophet" in the Tanakh, the rabbis go to extraordinary lengths to justify this denotation in a manner very different from what we might expect. Nevertheless, they do not negate Deborah's authority.

With regard to Deborah, it says: "And she sat under a palm tree" (Judges 4:5). The Gemara asks: What is different and unique with regard to her sitting "under a palm tree" that there is a need for it to be written? Rabbi Shimon ben Avshalom said: It is due to the prohibition against being alone together with a man. Since men would come before her for judgment, she established for herself a place out in the open and visible to all, in order to avoid a situation in which she would be secluded with a man behind closed doors. (B. Megillah 14a)

She was hence able to judge "as a woman" even if she therefore had to choose a very public place – under a palm tree. Still, men came to her to receive her judgements. Yet, neither Deborah's work as a judge nor her political and military achievements are enough to justify her prophetic status. In Deborah's case, too, the first thing the rabbis look at is her name and it is here that they see the key to her status as a prophet. Or, more exactly, in the addendum to her name: "wife of Lappidot." That which at first glance seems to be no more than an acknowledgment of Deborah's social status, proves for the rabbis to be a meaningful sign of the historical vision that they see connected to the teachings of the seven women prophets.

Deborah was a prophetess, as it is written explicitly: "And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth" (Judges 4:4). The Gemara asks: What is the meaning of "the wife of Lappidoth"? The Gemara answers: For she used to make wicks for the Sanctuary, and due to the flames [*lappidot*] on these wicks she was called the wife of Lappidoth, literally, a woman of flames. (B. Megillah 14a)

Nothing that Deborah "prophetically" stated in the bible cements her status, but solely an assumed act hidden in her name, hinting at the shrine: "For she used to make wicks for the Sanctuary." That is all.

Thus, only by hermeneutical means, by interpreting the meaning of these names, do the rabbis illuminate a hidden sign which unveils the prophetic status of these women and moreover underlines the messianic connection of seven otherwise unrelated Biblical protagonists. Their choice of Sarah, Miriam and Deborah, however, is not only linked by the hermeneutical detail of their

names. It cannot be a coincidence that all three are also linked to a greater cultural horizon, represented by a non-Jewish or non-Israelite woman. Sarah's prophetic status comes from "seeing" and is according to the rabbis linked to Iscah, who stayed back in Paddan Aram. Miriam is fully recognized by the rabbis as a prophet for the reasons stated in the Torah. But her prophecy is also linked to the actions of an Egyptian woman, Pharaoh's daughter, who finds the basket containing baby Moses on the other bank of the river. Deborah too has a partner who does not belong to the people of Israel: Yael the Kenite, who in the end defeated Sisera. I cannot imagine it is only by chance that these three women, through their collaborating women partners, point toward Israel's place in a larger cultural horizon. Rather, this can only be an integral part of the vision that the rabbis saw connected to the teaching of the seven women prophets. If it is true that their vision of history consciously constituted a messianic alternative made possible by women prophets, this vision most surely also includes non-Jewish or non-Israelite women.

The first three women prophets point to a world beyond Canaan. Let us now turn to Hannah. Only on the surface does it seem that through her intimations of a greater cultural horizon including Arameans and Egyptians, other tribes in Canaan ceased to be revealed in the rabbinic hermeneutics. On the contrary, with Hannah, the rabbis can, by means of hermeneutics, manifest a cultural split that had doomed the cosmopolitan international heritage of Israel to invisibility. While Deborah's name points toward a sanctuary – which in the era of the Judges cannot yet be the temple in Jerusalem – Hannah's prophecy points toward the anointment of the future kings of Israel. In her story, too, the rabbis emphasize a cultic detail.

Hannah was a prophetess, as it is written: "And Hannah prayed and said, My heart rejoices in the Lord, my horn is exalted in the Lord" (1 Sam. 2:1), and her words were prophecy, in that she said: "My horn is exalted," and not: My pitcher is exalted. As, with regard to David and Solomon, who were anointed with oil from a horn, their kingship continued, whereas with regard to Saul and Jehu, who were anointed with oil from a pitcher, their kingship did not continue. This demonstrates that Hannah was a prophetess, as she prophesied that only those anointed with oil from a horn will merit that their kingships continue. (B. Megilla 14a)

With Hannah, we have the first reference to a division. Her prophecy is linked to an anointment with oil. However not that of a priest in the temple, but of kings. Here a distinction is made between the line of David and Solomon as opposed to the line of Saul and Jehu. The latter were not anointed with oil

from a horn, pointing toward the temple of Jerusalem, but only with oil from a profane pitcher. For the rabbis, this explains why their kingdom was doomed to perish.

Here we begin to see what else is included in the teaching of the seven women prophets. Discreetly, at the latest with their exegesis of Hannah, the rabbis touch on the northern kingdom that was lost to Biblical history. According to critical historical bible studies, King Saul – a Benjamite – is a mythic symbol for the northern kingdom of Israel. This is all the truer of his successor Jehu, who in the Book of Kings is anointed by Elijah. This northern empire, “Israel,” which, according to archeological findings must have been an economically successful, cosmopolitan kingdom, was destroyed by Assyria in 722–720 BCE. To this day, it is associated with the “ten lost tribes” that will arise again in the course of salvation through the Messiah. On the other side, King David, a Judean, represents the southern kingdom of Judah, which was destroyed at the end of the sixth century BCE, but whose upper classes survived Babylonian exile as Jews were able to return to Jerusalem.

To me, it is clear that Hannah’s prophecy speaks of the survival of the house of David, while keeping alive the memory of the northern kingdom as well – from Saul to Jehu. I come to this conclusion because of the reason given for the prophetic status of the next woman prophet in the line: Abigail. According to rabbinic exegesis, the core of Abigail’s story is respect for King Saul. In the Biblical narrative, Abigail is devoted to David from the beginning, yet from the Talmudic viewpoint, she rejects David’s identification with the throne so long as Saul is sitting upon it. And she also rejects David’s desire for herself. With this she is implicitly (and before the fact) criticizing the “bloodguilt” that David will later enter with Bathsheba.

Abigail was a prophetess, ... David said to her: Nabal, your husband, is a rebel against the throne, as David had already been anointed as king by the prophet Samuel, and Nabal refused his orders. And therefore, there is no need to try him, as a rebel is not accorded the ordinary prescriptions governing judicial proceedings. Abigail said to him: You lack the authority to act in this manner, as Saul is still alive. He is the king in actual practice, and your seal [*tivakha*] has not yet spread across the world, i.e., your kingship is not yet known to all. Therefore, you are not authorized to try someone for rebelling against the monarchy. David accepted her words and said to her: “And blessed be your discretion and blessed be you who have kept me this day from coming to blood guiltiness [*damim*]” (1 Sam. 25:33). The Gemara asks: The plural term *damim*, literally, bloods, indicates two. Why did David not use the singular term *dam*? Rather, this teaches that Abigail revealed her thigh, and he lusted after her, and he went three parasangs by the fire of his desire for her, and said to her: Listen to me, i.e., listen to me

and allow me to be intimate with you. Abigail then said to him: "Let this not be a stumbling block for you" (1 Sam. 25:31). By inference, from the word "this," it can be understood that there is someone else who will in fact be a stumbling block for him, and what is this referring to? The incident involving Bathsheba. And in the end, this is what was, as indeed he stumbled with Bathsheba. This demonstrates that Abigail was a prophetess, as she knew that this would occur. (B. Megillah 14a–b)

Abigail's rejection of David is twofold – once out of respect for King Saul, and once because she recognizes David's adulterous desire.

Let us look at the inherent connection between Hannah and Abigail as constructed by the rabbis. Could Hannah's allusion to Saul and Jehu, and so to the destruction of the northern kingdom, be seen as a reference to a historical trauma whose repercussions were still felt in the Talmudic era? Or were the rabbis dealing with this trauma by, through Hannah's mention of the northern kingdom, recalling another Jewish exile unrelated to Jerusalem and the temple? Perhaps their concern was not the former northern kingdom, which had no longer existed for around one thousand years by the Talmudic era, but for the many who had been "lost." Strikingly, the Talmudic rabbis directly linked the prophecy of the following and sixth woman prophet, Huldah, with the salvation of the ten lost tribes. They do so by asking where exactly Huldah's colleague, the prophet Jeremiah, was at the time.

Huldah was a prophetess, as it is written: "So Hilkiah the priest and Ahikam and Achbor and Shaphan and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess" (2 Kings 22:14) as emissaries of King Josiah. The Gemara asks: But if Jeremiah was found there, how could she prophesy? Out of respect for Jeremiah, who was her superior, it would have been fitting that she not prophesy in his presence. The Sages of the school of Rav say in the name of Rav: Huldah was a close relative of Jeremiah, and he did not object to her prophesying in his presence. The Gemara asks: But how could Josiah himself ignore Jeremiah and send emissaries to Huldah? The Sages of the school of Rabbi Sheila say: Because women are more compassionate, and he hoped that what she would tell them would not be overly harsh. Rabbi Yoḥanan said a different answer: Jeremiah was not there at the time, because he went to bring back the ten tribes from their exile. (B. Megillah 14b)

Jeremiah has left to bring back the ten tribes, i.e. the people of the northern kingdom Israel. Here we can see that the Biblical and rabbinical critique of David might encompass a more far-reaching skepticism against the Davidic line. This is perhaps what is expressed through Huldah's actions. I believe that the teaching of the seven women prophets indeed contains hope for a messianic alternative to the Davidic paradigm. And I see it proven in the fact that the line of the seven women prophets culminates in the figure of Esther.

Was Esther a Jew? – Malka bat Shaul

Esther is of course considered to be a Jewish queen. But was Esther a Jew? The discussion in the Talmud itself points out that there had been a shift in the meaning of the word “Jew.” If the starting point is the twelve Israelite tribes, then Esther was not Judean or a member of the tribe of Judah. Although her uncle is introduced as a “Yehudi,” a Jew, he is called a “Benjamite” in the next breath:

“There was a certain Jew in Shushan the castle, whose name was Mordecai the son of Yair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, a Benjamite” (Esther 2:5).

Did Mordecai have a double identity? In the Biblical understanding of history, the kingdom of “Israel” is made up of the sons of Rachel: Joseph and his sons Ephraim and Menashe, as well as Benjamin, who was Rachel’s youngest son. To them were added the other tribes of the northern kingdom, except for Judah’s line. Judah was Leah’s son. His descendants made up the population of the southern kingdom, Judea. Both kingdoms – Israel and Judah – were destroyed. The northern kingdom, Israel, was remembered as the ten lost tribes, which would return when Israel was reunited by the Messiah. The exiled members of the southern kingdom, Judah, survived as Jews and, around sixty years after the destruction of Jerusalem, were given permission by the then Persian kings to rebuild their temple. The Biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe their return and the political reestablishment of the province of “Judea” in the Persian Empire. At that time, after the period in exile, the term “*Yehudi*” – Judean or Jew – had become a new national identity. All descendants of those who once lived in Israel or Judea became known as “*Yehudim*” – as Jews. “Jew” thus became an umbrella term for all survivors of the exile.

The doctrine of the ten lost tribes might then be a compromise with those who did not agree to this new, unified denotation, those, who did not feel themselves as “Jews” in the new sense. For the tribes were not truly lost, or no longer identifiable. Clearly, as we can see in the Book of Esther, Benjamites still existed, members of a tribe that had been part of the northern kingdom. If we wanted to be precise, we could say that with Esther, Persia was given a Benjamite queen. But this is not the message of the story of Esther. Mordechai is “*ha-Yehudi*” – the Jew! The Book of Esther underlines the Jewish identity of Mordechai and Esther, but this identity no longer describes membership in a tribe; it is supratribal, almost in the modern sense *political* identity. This new identity is not necessarily linked to a national state. One of its main features is its fluidity. One can be more than only Jewish. Double or even

multiple identities are typical of existence in the Diaspora. Esther is not only of Benjamite descent, but she is also at the same time a Jew. Her diasporic identity, however, does not restrict her to these two denotations alone. Esther is also a resident of Persia. This is mirrored in her two names: her Hebrew name, Hadassah, and her Persian name, Esther/Astarte. And the rabbis are aware of the multiplicity of Diaspora identities in their discussion of Esther's names.

"And he [Mordechai] had brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther" (Esther 2:7). She is referred to as "Hadassah" and she is referred to as "Esther." What was her real name? It is taught in a *baraita* that the Sages differed in their opinion as to which was in fact her name and which one was a description: Rabbi Meir says: Esther was her real name. Why then was she called Hadassah? On account of the righteous, who are called myrtles [*hadassim*], and so it states: "And he stood among the myrtles [*hahadassim*]" (Zech. 1:8). (B. Megilla 13a¹²)

Clearly, the story of Esther and Mordechai is a counternarrative to the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. The latter describe the return of the Jews from Persia (previously Babylon) to Jerusalem at the end of the Babylonian exile. Esther and Mordechai, however, represent those whose families did not return to Jerusalem. For them, judging by the Biblical narrative of the Esther story, the land and the temple were not even recognizable as a lodestar, at least not as far as the exact wording of the story of Esther goes. Its horizon is the Persian kingdom, there is no intimation of an alternative life in another country.

Esther and Mordechai must be seen as Benjamites. Their tribe has not been lost. This implicit message in the teaching of the seven women prophets embeds Jewish identity within a larger context. There are more Jews in the world than we know. They live among and are connected to other peoples and only on the surface are they invisible. In the Talmudic discourse on the teaching of the seven women prophets, the rabbis draw a direct line from Mordechai and Esther to the former Biblical King Saul. He was the founder of the united kingdom of Israel and also a Benjamite.

"There was a certain Jew in Shushan the castle, whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, a Benjamite" (Esther 2:5). (B. Megillah 12b)

Saul, who was from the tribe of Benjamin, did not kill the Amalekite king Agag (1 Sam. 15:8), from whom Haman was later born. (B. Megillah 13a)

By mentioning the Amalekite king Agag, the rabbis place the story of Esther in a much larger context. For them, it is about the great and unending war that

12 This discussion of her name continues for many verses.

Amalek, the incarnation of evil, continued to wage against Israel, and hence also against God.¹³ Amalek, the desert tribe that also ambushed escapees from Egyptian in the Book of Exodus (Exod. 17), stands for evil itself in the Jewish tradition, which rises in every generation and tries to exterminate Israel. In Deuteronomy, Moses warns the Israelites:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt – how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut. 25:17–19)

It would of course also be possible to explore here whether the eternal war with Amalek is directly linked to the messianic hope at the end of days. But in my opinion, it is sufficient to note that from both the Biblical and the rabbinical viewpoint, Esther stood the test and was victorious over Amalek (in the guise of Haman), even without direct intervention by God. More astonishing about the Talmudic rabbis' understanding of history however is that they trace Esther's line back even further – namely to the matriarch Rachel. Or, if we look at this the other way around, from Rachel, the mother of the Benjamites, descended King Saul in later generations and from him, again after many generations, descended Esther.

This teaches that in reward for the modesty (*tzniut*) shown by Rachel she merited that Saul, who was also modest, should descend from her, and in reward for the modesty shown by Saul, he merited that Esther should descend from him.¹⁴ (B. Megillah 13b)

As said, in their discussion of the prophet Huldah, the rabbis mention the prophet Jeremiah's intervention in favor of the ten tribes. In the Book of Jeremiah, his biographical data includes the fact that his family comes from "Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin" (Jer. 1:1). In a well-known quote from Jeremiah on Rachel, the matriarch of the Benjamites, who was crying for her children in exile, the prophet holds up the idea that the northern kingdom only seems to have been lost.

13 See Klapheck, "Ein jüdisch-feministisches Selbstverständnis nach der Shoah."

14 Rachel also represents solidarity with her sister Leah, who was not loved by Jacob. Leah gave birth to Judah. Here too, we can see the rabbinical understanding of history. Rachel's modesty expresses Israel's restraint as regards the dominance of Judah.

Thus said the Eternal: A cry is heard in Ramah – Wailing, bitter weeping – Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted. For her children, who are gone. Thus said the Eternal: Restrain your voice from weeping, Your eyes from shedding tears; For there is a reward for your labor – declares the Eternal: They shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your future – declares the Eternal: Your children shall return to their country. (Jer. 31:15–17; see also *Lamentations Rabbah*, Petichta 24)

In that case Rachel's children – Joseph and Benjamin – who represent the former northern kingdom of “Israel,” are not lost after all. What is more, according to the Talmudic interpretation of the Book of Esther, this reappearance would not occur only at the “end of days,” but in their Persian here and now. And the catalyst would not be a Mashiah ben David, a Messiah son of David, but a Malka bat Shaul, a Queen daughter of Saul.

A Messianic Alternative to the Son of David

My thesis is that the teaching of the seven women prophets offers a messianic alternative to the doctrine of the Davidic Messiah from the royal line of Judah. And that this alternative does not insist upon waiting until the end of days but is available now and offers salvation already today. Because this redemption is not fixated on the state or on a temple – the classical fields of male representation in Biblical patriarchal society – the rabbis construed a messianic alternative in the form of a line of prophetic women. It is a vision that allows for a multicultural Jewish identity and encompasses non-Jewish partners and political emancipation, bringing a taste of messianic times to the secular Persian here and now.

Whether or not this went hand-in-hand with a rise in status for real Jewish women at the time is questionable. But we can safely assume that cohesion in Jewish diaspora communities also depended upon the cooperation of the women. The teaching of the seven women prophets provided additional motivation for women to keep Jewish traditions alive and ensure the continuation of the Jewish people in the diaspora. Yet the construction of a line of prophetic women did more: it also made it possible to speak about an inner-Jewish trauma. Through the order of the women and the rabbinical reasons given for their status as prophets, the rabbis were subtly addressing a painful subject: the forgetting of groups that supposedly no longer existed – the “ten lost tribes.” Moreover, this critique seems to be directed not only against the Assyrians, who caused the fall of the northern kingdom. It also expresses criticism of a

well-known inner-Jewish dynamic, embodied by a rigid religious understanding that defines who is a Jew within narrow confines – ignoring, marginalizing, and making invisible all other Jews. The messianic aim of the line of the seven women prophets was that the descendants of the northern kingdom should no longer be considered as obliterated, but rather their salvific historical impact upon contemporaneous diasporic reality should be recognized. These women did not live with a homogenous “Jewish” exile identity that drew solely from the ideas of loss and the wish to return to a former era. Instead, a Jewish mixture of multiple identities speaks through them, anchored in a multilayered, multiethnic, international world. Unlike the messianic doctrine of Mashiah ben David, the Messiah from the Jewish, Davidic line who will appear at the end of days, the teaching of the seven women prophets show us that true, if only partial, salvation is possible in today’s reality, as it was in Esther’s day. This salvation – which can be understood as rescue and as secular emancipation – is nevertheless situated in the context of an eternal struggle against evil, denoted by “Amalek.” In this struggle, bravery is key, for there is no promise that God will help, although the struggle is on his behalf.

In the Book of Esther, Esther can be seen as a “secular queen,” and yet in the rabbinical discussion she can be recognized at the same time as a “messianic queen.” Esther unites both qualities – secular and messianic. But what makes her a prophet? The bible itself does not designate her as such. It is only the Talmudic rabbis who first see a prophet in her. Yet they name just one singular moment that proves this status:

Esther was also a prophetess, as it is written: “And it came to pass on the third day that Esther clothed herself in royalty (*va-tilbash Esther malchut bigdey malchut*)” (Esther 5:1). It should have said: Esther clothed herself in royal garments. Rather, this alludes to the fact that she clothed herself with a divine spirit of inspiration (*ruach hakodesh*). (B. Megillah 15a)

The passage quoted is from the moment in the story of Esther in which she is preparing for the banquet with the king. The rabbis note that the word *malchut*, royal, is doubled: *va-tilbash Esther malchut bigdey malchut*. As a queen, she clothes herself in royal garments and at the same time in a kind of meta-royalty. For the Talmudic rabbis, as a result, King Ahasuerus in one singular moment recognizes the two dimensions of royalty within Esther: on the one hand she is royal as his wife, whom he has made queen, but she also holds a royalty of her own, independent of himself, the king. The rabbi’s interpretation of this passage in the book of Esther is as follows:

During the banquet Esther said to Ahasuerus: "For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to be annihilated. (...)" (Esther 7:4). Then said the king Ahasuerus and said to Esther the queen" (Esther 7:5). The Gemara asks: Why do I need it to say "said" and again "said"? Rabbi Abbahu said: At first, he spoke to her through the translator, who would interpret on his behalf, because he thought that she was a common woman of lowly ancestry. Once she told him that she came from the house of Saul, immediately it says: "And said to Esther the queen." Ahasuerus himself spoke to her, as if she had royal lineage, she was a woman befitting his status. (B. Megillah 16a)

Ahasuerus, the rabbis believe, recognizes in Esther the royal descendant of King Saul. That makes her a queen in her own right – even without her royal Persian wedding. She is a descendent of an anointed king.

From the line of the seven women prophets, we can infer that the Talmud is offering no less than an alternative to the doctrine of the Davidic Messiah. But there is also another possible viewpoint. Is prophecy connected to a messianic vision? Not necessarily. The line of the seven women prophets leads to the rabbinic discussion of Queen Esther – a Benjamite queen, a queen in the Diaspora, queen of the lost tribes. Her rescue of the Jews does not lead back to the Holy Land, but forward to the emancipation of the Jews in the Persian diaspora. Perhaps it is possible to say that an alternative path of Israelite/Jewish prophecy is laid out here, one that leads in a new direction. A non-messianic direction that does not aim primarily at a physical return to Jerusalem but to the betterment of political conditions in the here and now.

In the rabbinical interpretation, the salvation that became possible through Esther's acts (without the help of God), is equally important to the liberation of the Israelites from pharaonic oppression (with God's help). The rabbis compare Esther's scroll with the Song of the Sea (*shirat ha-yam*) and with Hallel, the psalms of praise that are recited on the feasts of pilgrimage.

On what basis did they add this mitzva [reading the Esther scroll on Purim]? Rabbi Hiyya bar Avin said that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korḥa said that they reasoned as follows: If, when recalling the exodus from Egypt, in which the Jews were delivered from slavery to freedom, we recite songs of praise, the Song of the Sea and the hymns of *hallel*, then, in order to properly recall the miracle of Purim and commemorate God's delivering us from death to life, is it not all the more so the case that we must sing God's praise by reading the story in the Megilla? The Gemara asks: If so, our obligation should be at least as great as when we recall the exodus from Egypt, and let us also recite *hallel* on Purim. The Gemara answers: *Hallel* is not said on Purim, because *hallel* is not recited on a miracle that occurred outside Eretz Yisrael. (...) Rav Nahman said an alternative answer as to why *hallel* is not recited on Purim: The reading of the Megilla itself is an act of reciting *hallel*. Etc. (B. Megillah 14a)

For the rabbis, this explains why the Book of Esther was added to the Tanakh as an alternative version of rescue from that in the Torah.

The Sages taught: Forty-eight prophets and seven women prophets prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people, and they neither subtracted from nor added onto what is written in the Torah introducing no changes or additions to the mitzvot, except for the reading of the Megillah which they added as an obligation for all future generations. (B. Megillah 14a)

In light of the rabbinical interpretation, the addition of the Book of Esther leads back to King Saul, whose disqualification was perhaps only superficial, and states that the redemption of the Jews is not possible without the inclusion of those who were given up for “lost.” Seen in this way, the teaching of the seven women prophets points toward something that has been suppressed. It contains a witness to a protest of, if not resistance against, the general messianic doctrine of Mashiah ben David. Like a secret doctrine however, it can only be shared with those able to decode it using rabbinical hermeneutics. But once the code is cracked, it today provides us with the seeds of a rabbinic gender theory as the condition for an alternative messianic prophetic paradigm.

Conclusion – a “Counterprophecy”

The Talmudic teaching of the seven women prophets is a “counterprophecy” to the male representatives of the prophetic office. This raises the question of whether the teaching of the seven women prophets is a genuine Jewish-rabbinic construction or whether it corresponds to a model of counterprophecy that can be found also in other Abrahamic religions. A possible answer to this question may be supplied by Christian theological approaches to the role of Mary as a quasi-prophetess who brings about redemption/salvation without the support of a man, only by her ability to envision a future Messiah brought forth out of herself. There are Catholic theologies that see the figure of a real human being as the “Mother of God” as the prerequisite for an *a priori* worldly-secular quality of Christianity. I can imagine that the role of Maryam in the Qur’an could also serve as a basis for a female “counterprophecy” vis-à-vis the prophecies of Mohammed. The Qur’an refers to Maryam as “Aaron’s sister” (Q 19:28). This identifies her as the prophetess Miriam, who rejoiced with the Israelite women in the desert over Pharaoh’s downfall (Exod. 15:20). And at the same time, the Qur’an sees the “sister of Aaron” as the Mary of the New Testament who gives birth to the messianic prophet Jesus. In linking both and naming them “sister,”

it seems to me that the Qur'an too constructs a female lineage from the time of the Exodus (Miriam) to the time of the Second Temple (Mary). And perhaps the female partners of Jesus too, just as of Mohammed could be interpreted not so much as assistants, enabling a male prophet, but rather raise a voice of their own, shifting subtly the prophetic focus of their male counterpart. It is not upon me to apply a model of a female counterprophecy to other Abrahamic religions, yet the Talmudic teaching of the seven women prophets invites contemporary prophetology to a new theological approach acknowledging a counter-prophetic dialectic already anchored in scripture expressed by women exercising prophetic abilities, which received deep respect in the religious tradition they helped to enable.

Translated by Laura Radosh