WHY IS MIRIAM
ALSO AMONG THE PROPHETS?
(AND IS ZIPPORAH AMONG THE PRIESTS?)

SUSAN ACKERMAN
susan.ackerman@dartmouth.edu
Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH 03755

I. The Bible’s Women Prophets

Without doubt, the feminist revolution that has swept through the academic world at large has had an enormous impact on Hebrew Bible studies, with questions regarding the roles and status of women in ancient Israel having assumed a dominant place within the biblical field during the past twenty-five years.¹ Yet equally without doubt is the fact that, for biblical scholars who have sought to uncover indications of positive roles and an elevated status for women within ancient Israelite society, the results of the past twenty-five years of research have been somewhat mixed.²


² In my mind, there is no better example to illustrate this “mixed-bag” phenomenon than J. Cheryl Exum’s two companion articles on women in the birth story of Moses. In the first, “‘You Shall Let Every Daughter Live’: A Study of Exodus 1:8–2:10,” in The Bible and Feminist Hermeneutics (ed. M. A. Töpel; Semesta 28; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 63–82, Exum offers a reading of Exod 1:8–2:10 that celebrates a positive role for women in this text, depicting “women as
Certainly, this is true for scholars whose primary interest is the place of women within ancient Israelite religion. On the one hand, such scholars have been able to bring to the fore evidence of women’s religious observances that were basically equivalent to those of men and have even been able to isolate certain cult functions that seem to have been exclusively or at least principally the responsibility of Israelite women. Women, for example, seem to have held the exclusive responsibility for singing victory songs after an Israelite triumph in holy war and appear to have assumed a principal position as ritual musicians upon occasions of lament. On the other hand, our examinations have revealed manifold ways in which Israelite religion excluded or marginalized women. For example, while a woman, like a man, could dedicate herself as a Nazirite to God (Num 6:2), her vow could be nullified by her father (if she was yet unmarried) or by her husband (if she had wed [Num 30:2–15]). Likewise, although a woman, like a man, could participate in the great pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Succoth (as does Hannah, for example, in 1 Sam 1), it was only men, according to Exod 23:17; 34:23; and Deut 16:16, who were required to make these pilgrimages central to the Israelite festival calendar.

Another manifestation of this same “on the one hand”/“on the other hand” phenomenon is the role women could play as prophets within Israelite religion. Five women bear the title נביא, the feminine form of נביא, “prophet,” in the Hebrew Bible: (1) Miriam, the sister of Moses, in Exod 15:20; (2) Deborah,
said also to be “judging Israel” (גֶּהֶם נְניָּה), in Judg 4:4; (3) the unnamed wife of the prophet Isaiah in Isa 8:3; (4) Hulda, the prophet who verified the validity of the recently discovered “Book of the Law” for King Josiah, in 2 Kgs 22:14 (paralleled in 2 Chr 34:22); and (5) Noadiah, who seems to have opposed the restoration projects of Nehemiah in some way, in Neh 6:14. In many respects, this register provides important evidence for modern scholars who seek attestations of positive roles and positions of elevated status for women within Israelite religion. Indeed, a positive role and an elevated status seem especially indicated given how dominant a place prophetic narratives and the prophetic books hold in the biblical tradition as it has come down to us.

Still, we should express reservations. First, we must resist characterizing Isaiah's wife as a prophet in the vein of Miriam, Deborah, Hulda, and Noadiah. Unlike these women, Isaiah's wife did not engage in a typical prophetic ministry, making proclamations about matters of public interest and participating directly in public affairs. Rather, the sole action attributed to Isaiah's wife is a domestically based enterprise in which almost all ancient Israelite women engaged: conceiving by her husband and bearing their child. It is also important to note that, alone of the Bible's five women prophets, Isaiah's wife is not given a name. This is significant, for the giving of names in the Bible—especially the giving of names to women—is often an important marker of those women's autonomy and authority. The nameless status of Isaiah's wife, conversely, suggests relative powerlessness. In fact, I would argue that Isaiah's wife is assigned the title “prophet” only as an honorific by virtue of her marriage to the male prophet Isaiah, in much the same way, say, that Esther is assigned the title “queen” by virtue of her marriage to Ahasuerus, despite the fact that Esther is not of royal birth.

Furthermore, we must acknowledge that the same biblical tradition that recognizes four women as prophets (excepting, now, Isaiah's wife) assigns the title נביא to no fewer than twenty-nine men, and, if we assume, as I do, that the

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6 These are (in alphabetical order) Aaron, Abraham, Ahijah, Elijah, Eliezer, Ezekiel, Gad, Habakkuk, Haggai, Hananiah, Iddo, Isaiah, Jehu, Jeremiah, Jonah, Micah, Moses, Nathan, Oded, Samuel, Shemiah, Zechariah, and the anonymous, but clearly male prophets of Judg 6:8; 1 Kgs 13:11, 18; 20:13, 38; 2 Kgs 9:4; 2 Chr 25:15. This list counts, moreover, only men whom the biblical record labels נביא; if we were to include those men who bear the kindred titles of "seer," "man of God," and the like, our total would be still higher.
members of the various companies or bands of prophets mentioned in the Bible, such as the four hundred prophets of Ahab (1 Kgs 22:6), were exclusively (or at least almost exclusively) male, then the number of men designated as “prophet” in the biblical account soars into the triple and even quadruple digits. We should add to this soaring total, moreover, the names of the books attributed to eight additional men who, while not explicitly given the title הָאָמַר in the biblical text, were certainly assumed by its redactors to be prophets: they are Amos, Hosea, Joel, Micah, Nahum, Obadiah, Zephaniah, and the anonymous Malachi. Most modern biblical scholars would add as well Second (and possibly Third) Isaiah and the anonymous author(s) of Zech 9–14. The Protestant and Roman Catholic communities would include Daniel, and the Catholic tradition would also admit Baruch. Yet however one tallies up the specifics, any examination of the Bible’s prophetic literature makes clear that the prophetic words and deeds that dominate in the tradition are the prophetic words and deeds of men.

Such extensive documentation of the male-dominated character of the prophetic community, as well as the sorts of data mentioned above that more generally intimate women’s marginalization or exclusion from Israel’s cultic life, calls into question the degree to which the women named as “prophet” in the Bible can be considered examples of a positive role for women within Israelite religion. Instead, what becomes noteworthy about these women is how few of them there are compared to the number of men who were assigned the prophetic designation throughout Israel’s history. Miriam, Deborah, Hulda, and Noadiah, that is, ultimately appear to be not so much exemplars as anom-

7 The “king of Israel” of the Micahiah story in 1 Kgs 22 is in fact only identified by the name Ahab in v. 20, and thus some commentators have suggested that the narrative is not actually to be associated with this king; discussion can be found in Simon J. DeVries, Prophet Against Prophet: The Role of the Micahiah Narrative in the Development of Early Prophetic Tradition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 5; Steven L. McKenzie, The Trouble with Kings: The Composition of the Book of Kings in the Deuteronomistic History (VTSup 42; Leiden: Brill, 1991), 88–93; and Wayne T. Pitard, Ancient Damascus: A Historical Study of the Syrian City-State from Earliest Times until its Fall to the Assyrians in 732 B.C.E. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 114–22; see also the further references catalogued by Pitard on p. 115 n. 48.

8 Ezekiel does speak of “the daughters of your people who are prophesying” (Ezek 13:17), but whether this implies a company of female prophets, analogous to the companies or bands attested elsewhere in the biblical text, is unclear. Nancy R. Bowen, who provides the fullest analysis of this text, suggests, using comparative material, that Ezekiel’s female prophets are holy women in the community who assisted a woman at childbirth and who helped Israelite women deal with other issues they might have had relating to pregnancy and delivery (“The Daughters of Your People: Female Prophets in Ezekiel 13:17–23.” JBL 118 [1999]: 417–33). This very compelling analysis, however, while it does suggest some sort of a professional community of female prophets, does not necessarily imply the sort of company or band of prophets who lived and traveled together, as is described, for example, in the Elijah-Elisha narratives.
lies, their role as prophets exceptional rather than acceptable within Israelite religion.

My intent in this article is to explore the anomalous position of these four women prophets within Israelite religion, asking in particular how any women could have come to be considered prophets given the overwhelmingly male character of the Bible's prophetic tradition. In undertaking this enterprise, I will draw, at least initially, on explanatory models offered (in somewhat variant forms) by Jo Ann Hackett and Carol Meyers. Both of these scholars rely on the sorts of "theoretical formulations . . . the social sciences provide" to suggest that the amount of status and power that could be accorded to women in ancient Israel varied over time, in relation to the social and political organization that distinguished a particular era. Meyers, for example, in her book-length study Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context, argues that throughout Israel's tribal period, women experienced relatively high status and an increased potential for the exercise of power because of the predominantly domestic orientation of premonarchic Israelite society. More precisely, Meyers suggests that Israelite women of the premonarchic era could have been integrally involved in their community's economic, social, political, and cultural affairs—this because, in premonarchic Israel, the household was "the central institution for most economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of human existence" and because "ethnographic evidence specifically indicates the vital and active roles that females play in societies in which the household is the base unit of production and consumption." Consequently, Meyers concludes, women of the premonarchic period would have been "accorded prestige and experience[d] self-esteem."

Conversely, Meyers suggests, during periods of Israelite history where economic, social, political, and cultural matters were dealt with in a more public realm, an arena separated and differentiated from the domestic sphere, women's status and potential for the exercise of power declined. Meyers associates this shift with the emergence of the monarchy. "State formation created hierarchical relationships and robbed females of their customary equality and interdependence with men . . . the rise of a public world dichotomized the


11 Ibid., 139, 145.

12 Ibid., 173.
social structure and led to male preeminence.”13 Nevertheless, Meyers believes that even during the monarchical period, there were opportunities for women to experience some of the same elevated status and increased potential for the exercise of power that had characterized the lives of their premonarchic foremothers. She proposes, for example, that monarchical-era women who lived in a rural as opposed to an urban setting would have had more opportunities for status elevation and the exercise of power, because the sort of self-sufficient household in which the amount of status and power accorded to women is relatively high remained typical of Israel’s village landscape throughout much of the monarchical period.14 Meyers further suggests that, during the exilic and postexilic eras, Israelite culture experienced a “pioneer” period of extensive rebuilding that was not unlike the “pioneer” period associated with the development of new hill country settlements in premonarchic times. Such “pioneer” periods, Meyers goes on to claim, can also accord women higher status and opportunities to exert power because, during such times, a society needs and consequently assigns value to the labor of all its members, including women.15

In her two articles on basically this same topic—the ways in which certain types of Israelite social and political organization affected the amount of status and power that could be accorded to women—Hackett puts forward many similar formulations. For example, like Meyers, Hackett suggests that a domestically oriented form of social and political organization is a significant factor in making possible a relatively high degree of social and political status for women. Thus she writes: “Studies have shown that women tend to have more status within a society when the public and domestic spheres are not widely separated, that is, when important decision making is done within or near the home.” Also like Meyers, Hackett argues that the emergence of more formal and public decision-making systems corresponds to a decline in women’s ability to exert power: “hierarchical and centrally structured institutions have been less open to participation by women than have local and nonhierarchical institutions.”16 Hackett further, like Meyers, notes the relatively higher status and opportunities for the exercise of power that are available to rural women as opposed to women who live in urban contexts,17 and, along with Meyers, Hackett believes that the premonarchic era is the period of Israelite history that best exemplifies the sort of rural, nonhierarchical, decentralized, and domestically based environment in which women can most easily be accorded high status and attain positions of power.

13 Ibid., 190.
14 Ibid., 191–92.
16 Hackett, “In the Days of Jael,” 17–18.
17 Ibid., 19; eadem, “Women’s Studies,” 151.
In addition, Hackett calls our attention to two other factors that need to be taken into account when detailing the societal and political conditions that determine the amount of status and power available to women: first, the importance of class. Class implies a hierarchical society and consequently, according to both Hackett and Meyers, a society characterized by the relative disempowerment of women in general. Nevertheless, as Hackett points out, even within an otherwise male-dominated society, upper-class women, because of their families' associations with the power structures of their community, can find themselves able to exert power and achieve a relatively high degree of status.\(^{18}\) Second, Hackett speaks persuasively of the potential for an elevation in the amount of status and power available to women during times of social dysfunction—during times of war, for example. We Americans know this from our own society as the "Rosie-the-Riveter" phenomenon—that during World War II, because American men were away fighting, American women were able to move out of a relatively disempowered position in the home and into a much more acclaimed and appreciated role in the workplace. Hackett further notes that during such times of social dysfunction, hierarchical structures can break down to some degree and centralized institutions can give way to more localized control.\(^{19}\) As already discussed, these sorts of nonhierarchical and decentralized conditions can in turn foster opportunities for an elevation in women's status and for an increase in their ability to exercise power.

To be sure, both Hackett and Meyers are concerned only with the general status and amount of power accorded to women in ancient Israelite society and not with my more particular focus, the degree of status and power assigned to the women prophets of Israelite religion. Both Hackett and Meyers, moreover, examine primarily the village-based and domestically based social and political organization of premonarchic Israel as a test case for their theses and do not describe in extensive detail the variations to be found in Israel's first-millennium social and political organization and the consequent variations we would expect to find in the amount of status and power assigned to women throughout that period. My examination of Israel's women prophets, however, is concerned with the points where women prophets appear throughout the course of Israelite history, including points during the premonarchic, monarchical, and postexilic eras. Yet despite their more general interest in the amount of status and power available to all sorts of ancient Israelite women, and despite their limited chronological concentration, Hackett and Meyers set out theoretical approaches that can be profitably used to explore why at least some of the Bible's women prophets appear anomalously at certain points in Israelite his-

\(^{18}\) Hackett, "In the Days of Jael," 18–19; eadem, "Women's Studies," 149.

\(^{19}\) Hackett, "In the Days of Jael," 19; eadem, "Women's Studies," 149–51.
tory. I thus draw upon their insights to consider each of the women recognized as a prophet in the Hebrew Bible. As we will see, however, Hackett's and Meyers's approaches, while very useful in considering Deborah, Huldah, and Noadiah, are less applicable in analyzing Miriam. Hence, although Miriam is the prophet who appears first in the biblical text, she will appear last in my discussion, in section II of this paper, following my presentation in section I of the Bible's other three women prophets.

Before I begin that presentation, though, a caveat concerning the order in which the first section will proceed: considering first Noadiah, then Huldah, and finally Deborah. I adopt this reverse chronological order for two reasons. First, it is in keeping with the "first will be last" structure that defers the discussion of Miriam until section II. The second and more important reason concerns issues of the biblical text and history. As will be discussed more thoroughly below, the crucial problem in using the theories of Hackett and Meyers to analyze Miriam's prophetic role is the historical unreliability of the Bible's exodus account. Historical unreliability on the part of the biblical text is also a significant (although I believe surmountable) problem in analyzing the prophetic role of Deborah. I am more confident, however, of the historical reliability of the Bible's accounts that describe Huldah and Noadiah (although I would certainly resist any literalistic reading of these narratives). My confidence stems from the texts' dates of composition. While it is difficult, for example, to attribute historical reliability to the Deuteronomistic account in Judg 4 depicting Deborah, since it postdates the events it purports to describe by five hundred or more years, I believe that the Deuteronomists' account in Kings depicting Huldah must be reasonably accurate, at least in its broad outline. The Kings' account, after all, was (according to most scholars) written at a time roughly contemporary with the period of Huldah's ministry. Thus, its authors would have been compelled to present their story in a way believable to an audience that was already generally familiar with the period's social world and major events. The

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20 The only other scholar I know of who addresses this question is Phyllis A. Bird, "The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross (ed. P. D. Miller, P. D. Hanson, S. D. McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 403, 407–8. Bird's remarks are very brief, but she does explore some of the same issues that interest me here, in particular by noting the restricted number of religious roles available to women as "centralization, specialization, and power (at least in Judah) under a royally sanctioned Zadokite priesthood" increased (p. 405).

date of the Nehemiah accounts is less secure, but according to most recent commentators, the text postdates the time of Ezra and Nehemiah by only a few decades and its place of composition was Jerusalem, or at least Palestine. Like Kings, then, the book of Nehemiah would have needed to present its story in a way that generally rang true to an audience already familiar with its basic premises. Again, this is not to say that the Kings and Nehemiah accounts are correct in all their details, even including, perhaps, all the details these texts offer regarding their women prophets. Still, I consider these sources' overall portrayal of Hulda's and Noadiah’s social worlds to be basically reliable, especially, in Hulda's case, Kings' portrayal of the Josianic reform and its major objectives, and, in Noadiah's case, Nehemiah's portrayal of Jerusalem's civil and cultic affairs in the mid to late fifth century B.C.E. As we will see, moreover, it is this sort of general information about Hulda's and Noadiah’s social worlds that is most crucial to my argument. I thus begin my examination with this more trustworthy material before turning to the less secure accounts of Deborah and, finally, Miriam.

1. Noadiah. All we know from the account of Noadiah found in Neh 6:14 is that she was active during Nehemiah's attempts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem that began in 445 B.C.E. and that she somehow stood in opposition to this project. Still, however vague the specifics concerning Noadiah's ministry, the very facts, first, that the walls of Jerusalem were in need of restoration during her day; second, that these walls were presumably in need of repair


23 While the date of Ezra’s mission to postexilic Jerusalem and that mission's chronological relationship to the missions of Nehemiah is much debated among scholars (see, perhaps most thoroughly, the various positions summarized in Ulrich Kellermann, “Erwägungen zum Problem der Esradatierung,” ZAW 80 [1968]: 55–87; and in David J. A. Clines, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther [NCB Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984], 16–24), there is almost unanimous agreement that Nehemiah's initial mission should be dated to 445–433 B.C.E. and his second mission to sometime before 424 B.C.E. Cf. only Richard J. Saley, “The Date of Nehemiah Reconsidered,” in Biblical and Near Eastern Studies (ed. G. A. Tuttle; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 151–65.

24 Along with most commentators, I take Noadiah in Neh 6:14 as a woman prophet (נָבָּה) who was associated with a larger community of prophets (נָבָּיִם) who wanted to make Nehemiah afraid (נָפָּה). The Greek tradition, however, reads a masculine form, τῶν προφητῶν, for Hebrew נָבָּה, and Codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus read ἱερέως, “priests,” for נָבָּה. The Lucianic tradition, moreover, reads ἐνώπιον του θεοῦ, “warned,” reflecting Hebrew נָפָּה, for נָפָּה, suggesting that Noadiah was an ally rather than an opponent of Nehemiah.
because of some recent destruction they had suffered;25 and, third, that Nehemiah faced dissent in regard to his rebuilding endeavors suggest a period of tumult and disquiet within Judah. Passages elsewhere in Nehemiah's memoirs also speak of this time as one of social unrest and upheaval. Nehemiah 1:3, for example, describes how Jerusalemites during the time of Nehemiah's wall-rebuilding project found themselves living "in great trouble and shame" (בריהם בְּרֵיחַ וְשָׁאוּל), and Neh 5:1–5 elaborates by indicating that at least some of the Jerusalemites' troubles stemmed from their experiences of famine and a heavy debt load. This debt load, indeed, is described as being so heavy that some of the people found it necessary to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and houses, while others were forced to sell their children into debt slavery. This sort of devastating poverty, and the unwanted breakup of families and households that resulted, surely speaks of a society in crisis. Another significant contributor to the society's sense of disorder must have been the well-known tensions that existed between Nehemiah and the leaders of the neighboring communities of Samaria, Ammon, Ashdod, and Edom (Neh 2:10, 19; 4:1–3, 7–8, 11: 6:1–14). These tensions appear to have been so heated that they culminated in threats to kill Nehemiah because of the specter of militarization that his wall-rebuilding project implied (Neh 6:1–14).

We should, moreover, take note of some of the major objectives of Nehemiah's second mission, which took place at some point after the wall-rebuilding project had been completed but before 424 B.C.E.26 These objectives included the attempt to remove the civil official Tobiah from an apartment that had been provided for him in the temple compound; the attempt to guarantee that the Levitical priests were receiving their proper tithes; the attempt to ensure proper Sabbath observance; and the attempt to dissolve mixed marriages (Neh 13:4–31). These endeavors were all religious in nature, which suggests that the overall period of Nehemiah's ministry was characterized by cultic turmoil as well as by the sorts of civil disorder evidenced during the time of the wall-rebuilding project. Nehemiah in fact is pictured in the portion of his mem-

25 It is often assumed that the description of Jerusalem's breached walls and burned gates (Neh 1:3) refers to the Babylonian destruction of 586 B.C.E., but, as many commentators have pointed out, such an interpretation fails to explain why hearing what would be 150-year-old news distresses Nehemiah (Neh 1:4). Loring W. Batten thus suggests that Nehemiah is distressed because he learns that the wall-rebuilding efforts of Ezra 4:7-24 have failed (A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah [ICC; New York: Scribner, 1913], 184); most other commentators, however, argue that there was some serious disturbance in and attack on Jerusalem shortly before the time of Nehemiah's wall-rebuilding mission. Joseph Blenkinsopp offers perhaps the best discussion (Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985], 204).

26 See n. 23 above.
oirs that describes his second mission as being at odds with some of the major religious leaders of Jerusalem. For example, the presence of an apartment for Tobiah within the temple compound, which Nehemiah opposed, had been sanctioned by Eliashib, the priest who was in charge of the temple’s chambers (Neh 13:4–5); and the grandson of a different (?) priest Eliashib was one of the targets of Nehemiah’s attacks on mixed marriages (Neh 13:28). The textual tradition indicates, in short, a significant degree of disagreement among the community’s leaders as to how its religious affairs should be managed. This in turn intimates, as already suggested, that religious tensions were present in Jerusalem in the mid-fifth century B.C.E. alongside the civil discord that manifested itself during the time of Nehemiah’s wall-rebuilding endeavors.

All of this evidence of cultic and civil disarray is indicative of precisely the sort of unstable social and political situation in which, according especially to Hackett’s theoretical formulations, women are more likely to achieve higher status and have more opportunities for the exercise of power. We should recall, moreover, that Meyers specifically suggests that Israelite society during the postexilic period exhibits some of the pioneer-like conditions that can occasion an upsurge in the positions of power available to women. I would thus propose, based on these models of Hackett and Meyers, that we see Noadiah’s prophetic ministry as an example of the sorts of power a woman could assert in such a destabilized society. I would further propose that, because at least some of the instabilities that characterized the period in question were religious in nature, it is significant that the position of power in which Noadiah is said to assert herself is a religious position. Noadiah is a woman able to gain recognition as a religious functionary because the relatively destabilized religious organization of Jerusalem during her lifetime had room for women prophets in a way that the cult in more stabilized periods did not.

2. Hulda. The major events of Hulda’s ministry—that she is called upon by King Josiah (r. 640–609 B.C.E.) to validate and in essence to enshrine a newly revealed version of Israel’s covenant code and, consequently, to set in motion

27 It is probably best to understand Neh 13:4–5 and 13:38 as referring to two different Eliashibs, given that the high priest, the title conferred upon the Eliashib of 13:28, is not likely also to have held the more minor role of “the one appointed over the chambers of the house of our God,” which is the title assigned to the Eliashib of 13:4–5.

28 See also Rainer Albertz, A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period, II, From the Exile to the Maccabees (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 497–99, who suggests another source of religious tensions in the community: namely, that the economic crisis of, especially, Jerusalem’s lower classes had led to a religious split among the community’s elite concerning the degree to which Yahwism demanded of them a commitment to reform exploitative financial systems within their society and even to eliminate them (especially systems relating to credit and interest).
Josiah’s massive program of religious reforms—already suggest that she is active as a prophet in a period marked by at least some degree of religious upheaval. Of further importance in this regard are the biblical texts describing the reigns of Josiah’s predecessors, Manasseh (r. 687–642 B.C.E.) and Amon (r. 642–640 B.C.E.), as these accounts also suggest certain religious instabilities that existed within Judah and Jerusalem during the mid to late seventh century B.C.E. Granted, the accounts of Manasseh’s and Amon’s reigns have been so heavily shaped by their Deuteronomistic redactors that they cannot indicate definitively the precise nature of any cultic disorder. Still, we can say with confidence that, during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon, Jerusalem and the southern kingdom of Judah found themselves under Assyrian hegemony and that, even though the notion that the Assyrians imposed their own religious practices on their vassals has been discounted, it is nonetheless the case that Judah and Jerusalem would have experienced at least some degree of contact with the religious ideologies and practices of their suzerain. Mordechai Cogan, for example, speaks of “the voluntary adoption by Judah’s ruling classes of the prevailing Assyro-Aramaean culture” (emphasis mine). The result was surely some disruption of Judah’s and Jerusalem’s traditional religious routine. Can it be coincidence that Hulda is described as playing a major role in her community’s cultic life in conjunction with this period of religious disarray? Again, the theoretical formulations put forward by, especially, Hackett would argue no, suggesting instead that, like Noadiah’s, Hulda’s prophetic role is directly linked to the period of religious destabilization during which she lived.

Hackett’s study also suggests a second explanation for Hulda’s preeminence: class. Hulda, we are told, is the wife of Shallum, the keeper of the king’s wardrobe (2 Kgs 22:14; 2Chr 34:22). Unfortunately, neither this position nor this particular Shallum is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, and thus the specifics of Shallum’s place in Judeanite society and the responsibilities of his station are basically unknown to us. Surely, however, the keeper of the wardrobe was an official of at least some rank and status within the royal bureaucracy. Shallum, to put the matter another way, must have been a member of

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31 According to Samuel Yeivin (“Families and Parties in the Kingdom of Judah,” *Tarbiz* 12 [1941]: 261), Hulda’s husband, Shallum, is the same Shallum identified in Jer 35:4 as the father of Maaseiah, a keeper of the temple threshold; this reference was brought to my attention by Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; New York: Doubleday, 1988), 253.

32 Cf. the temple bureaucrat “in charge of the vestments” of the Baal temple in Samaria (2 Kgs 10:23).
his society’s upper classes, and, according to Hackett, women who are a part of this kind of upper-class household may, by virtue of the power available to their families, be accorded opportunities to exert power as individuals, even if they live during a time when the overall possibilities for women’s exercise of power are constrained. Moreover, Hackett’s work, along with Meyers’s, puts forward a third explanation for Hulda’s preeminence: that Hulda’s prophetic ministry was conducted in an environment where certain aspects of the domestic and public spheres were not widely separated. Note in this regard that 2 Kgs 22:14 and 2 Chr 34:22 describe how King Josiah’s emissaries, Hilkiah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asial, went to Hulda’s house in Jerusalem’s Second Quarter (the Mishneh) in order to consult with her. It is precisely this sort of situation, where decision making is done in or near the home, that, according to Hackett and Meyers, allows women greater potential for the exercise of power.

As we read on in the biblical account of Hulda’s prophetic work, we find one final aspect of her ministry that Hackett’s and Meyers’s theories might allow us to explain: the way in which Hulda disappears from the biblical text as soon as the descriptions of Josiah’s reforms begin. To be sure, Hulda’s absence from the biblical text at this point may be coincidental, completely unrelated to the endeavors Josiah has begun to undertake. But the specific nature of Josiah’s reforms may suggest otherwise. As described in the biblical text, these reforms have cult centralization as a major priority, so that the shrines and “high places” of the Judean countryside and of the old northern kingdom are destroyed (2 Kgs 23:8, 10, 13, 15, 19) and the priests of the towns of Judah are brought to Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23:8).32 Centralization, of course, is one of the factors that both Hackett and Meyers describe as detrimental for women who seek to assume power within their society. Hulda may have vanished from the tradition at precisely the moment Josiah’s reforms begin, because Josiah’s program of increasing centralization and institutionalization made it difficult and perhaps impossible for her to maintain her position of prophetic authority.

3. Deborah. For both Hackett and Meyers, Deborah presents one of the best test cases for their theories (if not the best), given that the twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C.E., the period in which biblical tradition locates

Deborah, is the period that each scholar explores as generally having the richest possibilities for a woman's exercise of power and her attaining of a relatively high status. For both Hackett and Meyers, this is because the premonarchic period represents a time of major decentralization and deinstitutionalization, during which the public sphere was not widely separated from the domestic sphere and during which leadership was generally ad hoc rather than hierarchically structured. Also both Meyers and Hackett stress the predominantly domestic orientation and rural demographic that characterized premonarchic Israel. Meyers further draws attention to the period's pioneer quality, and Hackett to the era's relative instability and features of turmoil.

Meyers probably has the better of Hackett in regard to this final point and, indeed, in regard to her overall argument concerning the premonarchic era, this due to the primary evidence on which each woman relies. Hackett's primary data for describing the tribal period as a time of turmoil are the biblical accounts found in Judges. Hackett recognizes and forthrightly acknowledges the problem with using Judges as a historical source. Nevertheless, she maintains that it is possible to extract from Judges useful historical information. This may be somewhat so regarding the arguably archaic poem found in Judg 5:1–31 (see further below), but for Hackett, even Judges' seventh-century Deuteronomistic redaction contains "information that seems to me relatively free of editorial reworking" and thus information, especially regarding "social data," that is historically authentic. I am less sanguine. I am more confident, however, regarding the archaeological evidence on which Meyers relies. In particular, Meyers relies on the excavations and regional surveys that increasingly have indicated an explosion of one-period sites in the previously unoccupied hill country of Canaan in the late thirteenth, twelfth, and eleventh centuries B.C.E. Like many scholars, Meyers understands this new hill country popula-


36 Hackett, "In the Days of Jael," 37 n. 34; see also the caveats she raises in "Women's Studies," 154.

tion to be Israelite (or at least "proto-Israelite"), and, also like many scholars, she proposes to describe early Israelite society using the hill country data. These data indicate, first, that the primary demographic of Iron I Israel was rural or village-based, which is precisely the sort of setting that Meyers's analysis identifies as being most conducive for generating positions of elevated status for women and the increased potential for the exercise of power. Because the hill-country villages, moreover, contain no remains of palaces or large residences, no public or administrative structures, and no sanctuaries or temples, Meyers, like others, posits a relatively undifferentiated and unstratified social order, with no political or religious elite and no civil bureaucracy. Similarly, because the hill-country remains indicate a primarily agrarian society, with only minimal evidence of manufacturing, mostly small-scale in nature (what we might call cottage industry), Meyers, like others, reconstructs an economy in which each household seems basically a self-sufficient unit, producing only what it needs for its own consumption but not any excess for sale or trade. In short, according to Meyers, the archaeological evidence reveals a rural, non-hierarchical, decentralized, and domestically based society, the sort in which, according to her social-scientific model, a woman such as Deborah could assume a position of leadership.

Meyers, however, and also Hackett, focuses primarily on the possibility of Deborah assuming a role as a military leader in early Israelite society, as is intimated in the archaic poem of Judg 5:1–31, and not on the religious role of prophet assigned to Deborah in the Deuteronomistic-era redaction of Judg 4:4. Yet even though Deborah is not specifically labeled as a prophet in Judg

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5, there are manifold indications in that text that she is to be regarded as a prophetic functionary. Certainly Deborah is "called" in Judg 5:1–31 in much the same way the root meanings of נאם and נאם suggest a prophet is "called," summoned by God to "Awake!" (Judg 5:12) and muster the Israelite tribes for battle against Sisera. Moreover, as is implicit within this call to arms and explicit elsewhere in the Judg 5 poem (see especially vv. 4–5 and 19–21), the battle to which Deborah summons the Israelites is a holy war, in which God sanctions the combat and even goes forth to fight at Israel's side. To verify that a battle is an actual holy war of God is a major role assumed by prophets elsewhere in biblical tradition (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 20:13; 22:6; 2 Kgs 3:11), suggesting again Deborah's role as a prophetic functionary in Judg 5. Some scholars have further argued that the title "mother in Israel" assigned to Deborah in Judg 5:7 is a marker of her prophetic role, the counterpart of the title "father" assigned to male prophets such as Elijah and Elisha elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kgs 2:12 and 13:14). Finally, note that, as Baruch Halpern has definitively shown, the prose account of Deborah's exploits found in Judg 4 is literarily dependent on the poetic narrative found in Judg 5. This suggests that the prose derived its explicit designation of Deborah as a prophet in Judg 4:4 from indications found in the Judg 5 poem, presumably the same sorts of markers I have just located.

Yet this is not to say, we should be clear, that there actually was a prophet Deborah: because of the historical unreliability of all of the premonarchic era's textual sources, including Judg 5:1–31, this remains unknown. What we can say, rather, is that the early Israelites generated a piece of literature, Judg 5:1–31, in which a woman was portrayed as a significant actor in the religious (and military) functioning of her society. I would propose, following Hackett and Meyers, that what makes such a portrayal possible is that premonarchic Israel was a rural, nonhierarchical, decentralized, and domestically based society in which positions of power could be held by women. The authors of Judg 5:1–31 were thus able to envision a woman such as Deborah acting as a prophetic functionary. Indeed, although, as previously stated, I am more confident of the historical reliability of 2 Kgs 22 and of the Nehemiah memoirs, including Neh 6:14, and thus more confident of the actual existence of Huldah and Noadiah as women prophets, I would if pushed insist only on the same claim regarding these two women: that the periods in which they are depicted as active are periods in Israelite history characterized by the destabilized context—especially

41 Halpern, "Resourceful Israelite Historian," 379–401; idem, First Historians, 76–103.
the destabilized religious context—that makes it possible for the biblical authors to imagine that women could act as prophets.

4. Miriam. However challenging the problems faced by the historian who would consider the Bible's portrayals of Noadiah, Hulda, and especially Deborah as prophets, significantly more problematic is a discussion of Miriam's prophetic role, because increasingly biblical scholars have come to doubt not just the historicity of the Bible's exodus accounts but the historicity of the entire exodus event. In particular, the recently developed models that locate the origins of Israel within Canaan have called into question the notion of any Israelite immigration from outside the "promised land," and even those contemporary scholars who do still admit the possibility of an exodus event now tend to describe the group involved as numerically insignificant.42 What all this means is that we cannot speak in any meaningful way of an "Israel" that existed before the tribal period, and certainly not of an "Israel" large enough to have a describable social and political organization. Consequently, we cannot assess whether that social and political organization was of the sort that would have allowed a depiction of a woman such as Miriam achieving a relatively high status within her community and stepping forward in the exercise of power.

To put the matter another way: the model used by Hackett and Meyers depends on historically describable societies. With Exodus, we leave history behind. To discuss Miriam's role as a prophet in Exod 15:20, therefore, we must leave the Hackett-Meyers analytical model behind in favor of another methodological approach.

II. Why Is Miriam Also among the Prophets?

When the French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep published his ground-breaking *Rites de passage* in 1909, his intent was primarily to define a tripartite structure of (1) separation, (2) margin or *limen* (from the Latin meaning "threshold"), and (3) reaggregation or reincorporation, which van Gennep wanted to argue characterized birth rites, puberty rites, marital rites, and, indeed, almost all life-cycle rituals across cultures. Yet within that same volume, van Gennep also proposed that his tripartite model of separation/liminality/reincorporation could be applied to the cross-cultural analysis of rituals other than life-cycle rituals, rituals related to seasonal and calendrical change, for example. Other scholars, pushing even further, subsequently suggested that van Gennep's rites-of-passage model might apply to elements within religious systems beyond those in which ritual was an explicit concern. For example, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Mircea Eliade proposed that, because it is “a consecration, an initiation,” a movement from “the profane to the sacred,” any journey to the “center” is a rite of passage, whether that journey be a pilgrimage to a sacred place (Mecca, Hardwar, Jerusalem); a heroic expedition in search of some legendary object (the Golden Fleece, the Golden Apples, the Herb of Life); or a quest for “self,” for the center of one’s being. Eliade’s sense that the rites-of-passage model helps structure stories of heroic adventure is also found in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*; he writes: “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return” (emphasis Campbell’s).

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Perhaps, however, the boldest and most thorough attempt to apply van Gennep's rites-of-passage model beyond the confines of that which is explicitly ritual is found in the work of Victor Turner and of his followers. To be sure, Turner, like van Gennep, began his career by seeking to describe ritual, especially the rituals of the Ndembu, a tribal people of Zambia, among whom Turner did his primary fieldwork. Turner argued that within Ndembu society, "conflict was rife" and "manifested itself in public episodes of tensional irruption I called 'social dramas.'"47 These social dramas, Turner went on to propose, were highly structured ritual events comprised of four parts: (1) an initial "breach of regular, norm-governed social relations"; (2) a "phase of mounting crisis"; (3) an attempt at "redressive action" (which, if unsuccessful, could be followed by a return to the crisis stage and then further attempts at redress); and (4) either "the reintegration of the disturbed social group or . . . the social recognition and legitimization of irreparable schism between the contesting parties" (emphases Turner's).48 As commentators have often pointed out, Turner's sense here of an "underlying temporal structure within social processes" is highly reminiscent of the three-part movement of van Gennep's rites-of-passage model,49 so much so that Turner himself often seemed to use his description of the four parts of the social drama interchangeably with van Gennep's description of the tripartite structure of rites of passage.50 This is especially true in Turner's discussion of the crisis phase of his social drama, which he saw as characterized by the same sorts of liminal experiences that van Gennep had earlier described for the middle phase of his rites of passage.51 Turner too, like van Gennep, saw his social drama model as applying to ritual events across cultures.

Turner further contended, especially in his later writings, that his model of social drama underlies not only ritual events across cultures but narrative as

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48 Ibid., 38–41.
49 Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, 40.
well. His fullest exposition of this thesis is found in his essay "Social Dramas and the Stories About Them," originally published in 1980 in a special issue of Critical Inquiry and later reprinted (1981) in a collected volume entitled On Narrative. There he writes, "The social drama, then, I regard as the experiential matrix from which the many genres of cultural performance, beginning with redressive ritual and juridical procedures and eventually including oral and literary narrative, have been generated." This insight about the social drama and its reflection in narrative, especially religious narrative, has subsequently been appropriated by scholars such as Alison Goddard Elliott, in her study of the hagiographies of early Christian saints (pre-1000 C.E.), and André Droogers, in his study of the biographies of several religious leaders (Jesus; the medieval merchant-cum-mendicant and lay preacher, Walde; the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth; a Zaire prophet, Kimbongu; the Buddha; and Muhammad). In particular, both Elliott and Droogers focus on various features of liminality and marginality that are present in their subjects' life stories. Caroline Walker Bynum has similarly studied the ways in which Turner's liminal phase manifests itself (and, more important to Bynum, the ways liminality does not manifest itself) in accounts of saints' lives from the European Middle Ages.

Alfred Haldar, Shemaryahu Talmon, Robert L. Cohn, Ronald S. Hendel, and William H. C. Propp have suggested, moreover, that biblical scholars push beyond a rites-of-passage analysis that focuses on stories of individual religious heroes in order to see the exodus story of the Israelite people, and especially that story's description of the people's journey from Egypt to Canaan, as an exemplar of Turner's rites-of-passage model. Most typically, these scholars see

54 Elliott, Roads to Paradise; see esp. chapter 7, "The Saint as Liminal Hero" (pp. 169–80).
55 André Droogers, "Symbols of Marginality in the Biographies of Religious and Secular Innovators," Nurn 27 (1980): 105–21; this reference was brought to my attention by Elliott, Roads to Paradise, 171.
the tripartite pattern beginning to manifest itself in Exod 12–15, when Israel performs a special blood ritual, the pesah, and then, by leaving Egypt, separates itself from its previous geographical home and its previous social status of slavery. Cohn writes, for example, “the crossing of the Red Sea marks the final break.” Propp offers an important corrective, however, by pointing out that in the typical rite of passage, the participant returns to his starting point: “He, not his home, has changed.” Propp therefore argues that, “To fit the initiation pattern as defined by van Gennep and Turner, we should consider Israel’s entire absence from Canaan, from Joseph to Joshua, as their liminal period.” As I will discuss further in section IV of this article, I disagree somewhat with Propp regarding the end of Israel’s liminal period, but I agree wholly with him that it begins already with Israel’s descent into Egypt; in Propp’s words, “No less than the wilderness, Egypt is the crucible in which Israel is refined (Deut 4:20; 1 Kgs 8:51; Jer 11:4), from which it emerges a great people (Exod 1:7, 8, 12).” It is further my contention that focusing on certain aspects of liminality as found within the Egypt and wilderness sections of the exodus narrative illuminates the assigning of the role of prophet to Miriam in Exod 15:20.

According to Turner, the most defining characteristic of the liminal state or the liminal persona is ambiguity; in Turner’s classic formulation, to be liminal is to be “betwixt and between.” “Liminal entities,” Turner writes, “are neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the conventions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial . . . Thus liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.” Liminal persons, Turner goes on to state, are often represented “as possessing nothing . . . to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system.” Indeed, so absent are marks of rank or distinction that Turner labels the liminal community as “egalitarian.” But, as Turner makes clear (at least in his earlier writings), this liminal experience of egalitarianism and of what he calls communitas, a feeling of “intense social togetherness” and “of union with one’s

55 Cohn, Shape of Sacred Space, 13; see similarly Hendel, “Sacrifice as a Cultural System,” 375.
56 Propp, Exodus 1–18, 35.
57 Ibid.
58 Turner, Ritual Process, 95.
60 This description comes from Edmund Leach, “Anthropological approaches to the study of the Bible during the twentieth century,” in Edmund Leach and D. Alan Ayeock, Structuralist
fellow human beings,” is not a wholly idealized experience: the statusless, and even passive and humble participants in an initiation ritual, for example, typically find themselves required to submit to the general authority of ritual elders who impose upon the initiates numerous tests and trials (fasting, seclusion, sexual continence, poverty, homelessness, silence, etc.). These same ritual elders also often reveal to initiates knowledge relating to the new privileges and responsibilities they are soon to assume within their society, especially the sacra or knowledge relating to things divine.

The degree to which these many markers of liminality are present in the Egypt and wilderness sections of the exodus narrative is striking. As the story of the Egyptian enslavement begins in the first chapters of Exodus, for example, we are introduced to the Israelites as aliens, a people living in a land that is not their own and a people who, increasingly, are perceived as threatening by that land’s indigenous inhabitants. We are also told that these Israelites are forced to undergo experiences of trial. First, they are conscripted to build the pharaoh’s store cities (Exod 1:13); then they are forced to labor in other construction projects and in agricultural work (Exod 1:14); next, they are required to kill their baby boys at birth (Exod 1:16); finally, when the midwives who attend the Hebrew women circumvent the murderous command of Pharaoh, the Israelites are told to throw their boy children into the Nile to drown (Exod 1:22). As the narrative continues, moreover, the trials of the Israelites continue and even intensify. In Exod 5:7, the pharaoh, in denying Moses’ and Aaron’s demands that the Israelites be let go to journey three days into the wilderness to sacrifice, orders that the Israelites shall now be forced to make bricks without straw; when the people fail to maintain their daily quota under these oppressive conditions, their supervisors are beaten (Exod 5:14). Especially important to note here is the role of Moses and Aaron in instigating this increase in the Israelites’ persecutions, for while it could be argued that the people’s trials in Exod 1, imposed upon them by the pharaoh alone, are not really typical of a liminal experience (given that it is more usually the ritual elders of a community who are responsible for the liminal persons’ ordeals), by Exod 5 the people’s suffering is being brought about by their ritual leaders, Aaron and Moses, and the God for whom those leaders speak. The text indeed makes clear that the people perceive the matter in this way; thus, they cry out to Moses and Aaron, “You have made us odious in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us” (Exod 5:21; emphasis mine). More significant still is God’s deliberate hardening of Pharaoh’s heart throughout the


64 This description comes from Bynum, “Women’s Stories, Women’s Symbols,” 30.
plague cycle (Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10) and the concomitant pro-
longing of Israel's suffering that this hardening occasions.65

Finally, however, the Israelites are allowed to leave Egypt. But this hardly
means their trials are at an end. They are pursued by the Egyptians, who
change their minds about letting the people leave (Exod 14:1-18); they thirst at
Marah, where there is only bitter water to drink (Exod 15:22-26), and again at
Massah-Meribah, where there is no water at all (Exod 17:1-7). They hunger in
the wilderness of Sin, where there is nothing to eat (Exod 16:1-36), and they
find themselves under Amalekite attack at Rephidim (the same location as
Massah-Meribah [Exod 17:8-16]). God's role in bringing about this suffering,
moreover, is again a significant feature of the narrative. It is God, for example,
who once more hardened the heart of Pharaoh (Exod 14:4, 8), and the hearts of
Egyptians as well (Exod 14:17), and so laid the foundations for the Israelites'
 ordeal at the Reed Sea. It is also God who put the Israelites to the test (יֹּבֶן)
when they thirsted at Marah (Exod 15:25)66 and again at Massah-Meribah (the
very name Massah as given in Exod 17:7 comes from the root הנב, "to test").67
And it is again God who tested the people (יָּסָב) when they hungered in the
wilderness of Sin (Exod 16:4). All of this—the sustained tests and trials and the
role of the deity in giving rise to these ordeals—points to a continuing exhi-
bition of liminality for the Israelites. The specific trial of hunger—given that
fasting is so characteristic of liminality—is particularly important here.

Other specific features of liminality are also readily apparent at this point
in the narrative. The Israelites are homeless—and homeless in such a way that
very literally marks them as "betwixt and between," as they wander between
the land of Egypt, from which they have escaped, and their "promised land," to

65 This "hardening of the heart" motif has been much discussed in the literature. The most
recent considerations of which I know are Robert B. Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testa-
ment," *BSac* 153 (1996): 410-34; David M. Gunn, "The 'Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart': Plot,
Character and Theology in Exodus 1-14," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature* (ed.
D. J. Clines, D. M. Gunn, and A. Hauser; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982), 72-96; and Robert R.

66 The Hebrew יָּסָב, "he tested him," is in fact ambiguous regarding the identity of the tester
and the tested at Marah. I follow most translations and commentators in assuming God as the sub-
ject and Israel as the object. For further discussion, see William H. C. Propp, *Water in the Wilder-
ness: A Biblical Motif and Its Mythological Background* (HSM 40; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987),

67 On God's role as "tester" at Massah-Meribah, see similarly Deut 33:8 (יֹּרֶב) and Ps 81:8
(יֹּרֶב). However, in Exod 17:2, 7, and also in Deut 6:16 and Ps 95:8-9, it is the Israelites who are
said to test Yahweh at Massah-Meribah. As my argument makes obvious, it is my inclination to take
God's identity as the "tester" as the primary tradition. Certainly, the identification of God as
"tester" in Exod 15:22-26 and 16:1-36, the two pericopes that immediately precede and stand gen-
erally parallel to Exod 17:1-7, suggests this. Further discussion (although not necessarily agree-
which they go. "Wandering," moreover, implies that there is a quality of aimlessness in the Israelites' movement (see especially in this regard Exod 14:3), which suggests further the sort of ambiguity that characterizes liminality. Then there is the place in which the Israelites are wandering—the wilderness, which, for liminality generally and for the Bible in particular, is the paradigmatic liminal space. Edmund Leach, for example, writes of the biblical wilderness as "a 'betwixt and between' locality . . . which is neither fully in This World nor in The Other." Leach further points out that, in the Bible, the wilderness as liminal space gives rise to the characteristically liminal experience of divine inspiration and revelation, given that the wilderness's position "at the boundaries between This World and The Other . . . [is an] appropriate place for a meeting between the natural and the supernatural." Certainly this is true for the exodus narrative, which devotes Exod 20:1 through Num 10:11 to the story of Israel's encounter with Yahweh at the wilderness mountain of Sinai and the revelation there of the sacra or tòrá.

There is one final feature of liminal periods in general and of Israel's liminal experiences in particular that we need to discuss here: Turner's description of liminality as a time of "anti-structure," during which, among other things, the social identities that have previously defined liminal entities dissolve. For Turner, this dissolution is most often manifest by a single inversion or reversal of the liminal entities' previous social identity. A political authority is debased, for example, or a person of wealth assumes a stance of poverty. In the exodus story, however, the dissolution of social identity is more typically depicted in terms of multiple reversals. The Israelites, for example, are described as alternating between the social identities of slave and free. Joseph, who comes to Egypt a slave, is later freed, and the family of Israel is free when it joins him. Subsequently, however, these Israelites find themselves enslaved, only to reclaim their freedom after the tenth plague and the Reed Sea event. Yet they resubmit to servitude at Sinai, where they agree to become the same slaves to God they were to Pharaoh. The people's economic status during this period is similarly fluid: the Israelites, who originally came to Egypt impoverished, or at least impoverished in terms of food (owing to the famine in the land of Canaan), come to prosper during the lifetime of Joseph (Gen 48:27), but seem

68 Leach, "Approaches to the study of the Bible," 16; this quotation was brought to my attention by Elliott, Roads to Paradise, 173.
69 Leach, "Why did Moses have a sister," in Leach and Aycock, Structuralist Interpretations, 37.
70 Turner discusses, for example, how the Ndembe chief-to-be is debased and humiliated as part of his initiation ritual (Ritual Processes, 100–106); Bynum notes that the taking on of poverty is a part of the liminal behavior of medieval saints, especially males ("Women's Stories, Women's Lives," 34–35).
71 Cf., e.g., Exod 14:12 and 23:25; see further Propp, Exodus 1–18, 37.
to find themselves hard up again during the period of their enslavement, only to leave Egypt wealthy once more, bearing “jewelry of silver and gold” (Exod 3:22; 12:35; see too Exod 11:2) and other plunder taken from the Egyptians.

The biblical story, moreover, makes clear that it is not just the community at large that experiences this sort of fluidity in its status but also individuals within the community, especially its leaders. Thus Moses, who is born a slave, spends his childhood as a royal prince, then his early adult years as a lowly shepherd, before his final transformation in Exod 3:1–4:17 into a miracle worker and the leader of his people. And Miriam, although initially depicted as a secondary character in the birth story of Moses (assuming she is the unnamed sister of Exod 2:4, 7–8), comes to occupy the exalted position of prophet in Exod 15:20, even though this title elsewhere in the Bible’s exodus account is reserved for God’s intimate, Moses (Deut 18:15, 18; 34:10), and for Moses’ spokesperson and the man God chooses to be the progenitor of the Israelite priesthood, Aaron (Exod 7:1). In answer, then, to the question that I posed as the main title of this paper, “Why is Miriam also among the prophets,” Miriam is assigned the prophetic role in Exod 15:20 that is otherwise accorded only to men in the exodus account because the narrative locates her prophetic identity as belonging to a liminal period of anti-structure. In narrative depictions of liminality, the gender conventions that more usually restrict women from holding positions of religious leadership can be suspended. Therefore Miriam can be described as occupying a position as a prophetic functionary that, outside of liminal time and space, women are generally denied.

III. Is Zipporah among the Priests?

Embedded in my observations in the preceding paragraph—that, in the exodus narrative, Moses and Miriam as individuals can manifest the same experiences of liminal anti-structure that all Israel otherwise realizes as a community—is a more general understanding that, as it is recounted in the biblical text, the story of Moses as an individual presents in microcosm much of what the story of Israel as a community presents in macrocosm. This phenomenon has been also pointed out by others. For example, in his study of Exod 1–4, Michael Fishbane speaks of the ways in which “the opening chapters of the Book of Exodus (1–4) ... foreshadow the events and scenarios of chapters 5–19.” 72 Yet my analysis more specifically suggests that, as I have read the exo-

72 Michael Fishbane, “Exodus 1–4/The Prologue to the Exodus Cycle,” in Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts (New York: Schocken, 1979), 64. See also Moshe Greenberg, Understanding Exodus (New York: Behrman House for the Melon Research Center of the
dus story of the Israelites as a narrative filled with liminal markers, so too can the life story of Moses be read. Note, for example, that as the story of Israel in Egypt begins in the book of Exodus by describing the Israelites as aliens, inhabitants of a place that is not their own, so too is Moses quickly characterized in his life story as an alien, a Hebrew slave who is living in an Egyptian palace that is not his own. He is thus residing, to use once more Turner’s evocative description of liminality, “betwixt and between” identities, and the text takes care to mark his liminality in other ways as well. In Exod 2:10, for example, Pharaoh’s daughter gives her new-found child the very “betwixt and between” name of Moses (מֹשֶׁה). To be sure, an ancient Israelite audience might not have understood one aspect of this name’s liminality that modern scholars do: the linguistic ambiguities that, despite the Hebrew etymology proposed for מֹשֶׁה, just as plausibly allow us to understand the name as etymologically related to Egyptian ms(ω), “to beget,” as found in names such as Tutmose or Rameses. Yet even for an ancient audience, the name Moses, because it is derived by an Egyptian princess from a Hebrew verb (משָׁה, “to draw out”), carries within it connotations of a “mixing up” of tongues, which in turn implies for Moses a “mixed-up” or liminal identity. Within the narrative tradition, Moses’ “mixed-up” identity further manifests itself after he has grown up. He kills an Egyptian one day because he sees him beating a Hebrew (Exod 2:11), suggesting that by this point in the story, Moses’ allegiances have come to lie with the Hebrew part of his identity. Yet the very next day, two Hebrews question Moses’ right to interfere in their affairs (Exod 2:13–14), which implies that they identify Moses not as “one of us” (the Hebrews) but as “one of them” (the Egyptians). He thus continues to be caught between worlds.

As Israel’s liminal experiences in Egypt finally came to an end, however, after the tenth plague, so too do Moses’, as he flees from the pharaoh who seeks to kill him because of the Egyptian taskmaster’s death (Exod 2:15). Yet as Israel fled the liminality of Egypt only to encounter more experiences of liminality in the wilderness, so too does Moses. Despite, for example, his efforts at marriage and at beginning a family once he has settled in the land of Midian, he still seems to perceive himself as an outsider within this community. Thus he names his firstborn son Gershom, from the Hebrew גֵרֶשׁ, “alien,” because, he says, “I have been an alien residing in a foreign land” (Exod 2:22). Like the Israelites, moreover, Moses receives a typically liminal revelation of divine knowledge or

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74 Although there has been much speculation in, especially, the rabbinic tradition, the biblical text is in fact silent on the questions of how and when Moses learns of his Hebrew heritage.
sacra while in the wilderness (Exod 3:1–4:17), at the very mountain, indeed, where God subsequently speaks to the Israelites en masse. Finally, like the Israelites, Moses’ wilderness experience is characterized by liminal-like testing, and testing that is instigated, as is usual in liminality, by a spiritual elder; in both Israel’s and Moses’ case, God. In Moses’ case, this testing manifests itself as Moses journeys back to Egypt to take up his divinely appointed role as the Israelites’ redeemer, when “at a lodging place along the way, Yahweh met him and sought to kill him” (Exod 4:24).  

As many commentators have pointed out, the “him” to which Exod 4:24 refers is in fact unclear, and some thus see Yahweh’s intended victim as Gershon, Moses’ son. But because Gershon has not previously been mentioned in the pericope, I agree with the ancient versions and with the vast majority of commentators that the intended victim of Yahweh’s attack is Moses. I further agree, again with the vast majority of commentators, that, after Zipporah, Moses’ wife, moves in Exod 4:25 to avert Yahweh’s attack by circumcising Gershon, her son by Moses, the “feet” she is next said to touch are Moses’ (although the text again uses a pronoun referent that does not make this totally clear). Finally, I agree, still with the majority of commentators, that the reference to

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77 For further discussion, see Kaplan, “And the Lord Sought to Kill Him,” 65–74.
Moses' "feet" in the text is to be taken as a euphemism for his genitalia and that what Zipporah is doing with her touching is either actually or symbolically circumcising Moses. She then addresses Moses with what seems to be liturgically laden language: "You are surely a bridegroom of blood [or a "bloody bridegroom"] to me" (Exod 4:25). What all this suggests is that Zipporah, in performing an actual circumcision of Gershom; in performing some sort of circumcision, whether actual or symbolic of Moses; and in giving voice to a highly formalized and even formulaic pronouncement after these acts, is characterized in this passage as some sort of ritual specialist.

As to what sort of ritual specialist Zipporah might be, Bernard Robinson gives us a clue. He writes: "By undertaking the circumcision of her son, a male role, Zipporah has taken the place of her father Jethro. Henceforth she is not only Moses' wife, but also his surrogate father-in-law." Propp similarly suggests that Zipporah may be "usurping the role of father-in-law. For, if Moses is her hāṭān 'bridegroom/son-in-law/circumcised,' she is conversely his hōṭēn 'father-in-law/circumciser.'" Moses' actual father-in-law, however, is pictured throughout the exodus tradition not just as the potential circumciser of his son-in-law, but also as a priest (Exod 2:16; 3:1; 18:1). We are thus led to ask, as I do in the second half of this article's title: If Zipporah is to be seen as assuming her father's role as circumciser, should she also be seen as assuming in certain ways his role as priest? Note in this regard that, in the exodus tradition, the blood offering of circumcision is closely associated with the blood offering of sacrifice, and, while we must grant that the biblical authors do not necessarily regard the offering of sacrifice as the prerogative of priests alone, the exodus

78 Kosmala's etymology of ḫēṭṭē, "to circumcise," based on a cognate in Arabic, and his resulting translation of ḫēṭṭē ḫēṭṭē as "the blood-circumcised one" ("Bloody Husband," 25–27) have generally been rejected by biblical scholars. See Childs, Exodus, 97–98.
80 Propp, Exodus 1–18, 240.
81 The name of Moses' father-in-law is a matter of some confusion in the biblical text. The dominant tradition, in Exod 3:1; 4:18; and 18:1–27, identifies the father-in-law as Jethro. But in Exod 2:16–22, the father-in-law is assigned the name Reuel, and, although the Hebrew is ambiguous, Num 10:29–32 seems to take the father-in-law's name to be Reuel as well. That text further mentions Hobab, identified as Reuel's son. But in Judg 1:16 and 4:11, Hobab is the name given Moses' father-in-law! Still, despite these ambiguities, the tradition is practically unanimous regarding the salient point for my argument: that Moses' father-in-law was a priest.
82 See especially the association of circumcision and the pesah, sacrifice in Exod 12:1–28, 43–49 and the more general association of circumcision and the keeping of Passover in Josh 5:2–12.
account does ultimately insist on sacrifice as an exclusively priestly franchise. Thus, by presenting Zipporah as making a sacrificial-like offering that we normally would have expected to have been made by her priestly father, Exod 4:24–26 provocatively hints at the notion of Zipporah assuming a priest-like role.

Yet everywhere else in biblical tradition, the priesthood is characterized as the province of males alone. How, then, to explain the language hinting at Zipporah's priest-like status? I would again turn to Turner's descriptions of liminal anti-structure and suggest that, as Miriam could be imagined as holding the otherwise typically male position of prophet during the story of the liminal sojourn of the people of Israel in the wilderness, so too can Zipporah be depicted as if she occupies the otherwise exclusively male position of priest during the story of the wilderness sojourn of Israel's spiritual leader and micro-cosmic representative, Moses. Indeed, the site of Zipporah's priest-like actions—some unnamed lodging place at some unspecified point on Moses' journey back to Egypt—could hardly be more ambiguously (that is, liminally) described. Thus, I conclude that, as liminal space and time in the life story of Israel made possible the characterization of Miriam as a prophet, so too have liminal space and time in the life story of Moses made possible a priest-like role for Zipporah that is otherwise difficult (if not impossible) to imagine within the organizational structure of Israelite religion.

IV. Concluding Thoughts on the Conclusion of Liminality

As I noted in section II above, Turner's notion of social drama, as derived from van Gennep's rites-of-passage model, assumes an underlying temporal structure and consequently change; liminality, to put the matter somewhat more bluntly, does not last forever. It is succeeded, in van Gennep's terms, by reaggregation/reincorporation or, in Turner's terminology, by reintegration. In the story of Moses' life, this moment of reintegration is dramatically suggested in Exod 4:27, when Aaron, sent out into the wilderness by Yahweh to rendezvous with Moses, meets him and kisses him (hence reuniting Moses with his rightful family), and in Exod 4:29–31, when Moses, through Aaron, tells the Israelites of all Yahweh has said to him and "the people believed" (hence reuniting Moses with his rightful community and reuniting him in such a way that affirms his newly designated identity as the people's leader and redeemer). Not coincidentally, these episodes take place immediately after Moses survives Yahweh's murderous threat in Exod 4:24–26. It is almost as if, having passed liminality's final test, Moses can instantly find himself accepted back into the

bosoms of his birth family and his people. Also not coincidentally, it is at this point that Zipporah essentially disappears from the text, as there seems to be no place in the life of the reintegrated Moses for such a liminally depicted (that is, priest-like and foreign) wife. Gershom, the alien son, essentially disappears at this point in the story as well, his liminally depicted character likewise deemed by the tradition to be an element inappropriate to the narrative’s reaggregated phase. 85

Miriam is similarly a character who belongs only to the liminal phase of the life story in which she is found, the life story of Israel as a community. Unfortunately, however, the story of the Israelite community does not mark as clearly the concluding moments of Israel’s liminal life as the Moses narrative marks the end of Moses’ liminality. According to most who have previously commented on this issue, Israel’s liminality continues throughout the entire course of the exodus tradition, ending only with the conclusion of the community’s forty years of wandering, at the moment in Josh 3–5 when the people celebrate Passover after finally having entered into the promised land. 86 There is much that can be said on behalf of this interpretation: during the forty years of wandering, the Israelites’ lives are filled with experiences we have come to understand as liminal, such as trials and ordeals and the revelation of sacred knowledge. Throughout the forty years, moreover, the Israelites sojourn in the wilderness, which for the Bible, as we have seen, is the prototypical liminal space. The generally aimless quality of the Israelites’ wandering I have also characterized as typical of liminal movement.

Hendel, however, interprets somewhat differently, arguing that “the limi-

85 To be sure, Zipporah, along with Gershom, does return briefly to the exodus tale in Exod 18:1–6 (accompanied by Moses’ second son, Eliezer, who, if anything, is even more invisible in the text than his mother and elder brother; prior to Exod 18:3, see only Exod 4:20). But the reappearance of Zipporah and Moses’ children in Exod 18:1–6 should not be seen as signaling their reincorporation into the narrative but rather serves only to underscore the marginal position they occupy in the life story of the reincorporated Moses. This is evidenced by the fact that we are told, in 18:2, that it was Moses himself who had brought about their disappearance in his life by sending them back to his father-in-law at some point after the Exod 4:24–26 episode; also by the fact that there is no indication anywhere in the Exod 18 text that Moses proposes to take Zipporah or his offspring back. As I understand it, this is because the alien and liminal Zipporah, along with her alien sons, belongs only to the alienated or liminal phase of Moses’ life story. When that liminality ends, beginning in Exod 4:27, so too does any place for Zipporah in the text. Some commentators, however, do believe Zipporah rejoined Moses at Sinai. Jacob Milgrom suggests, for example, that the reason Aaron and Miriam speak out against Moses’ Cushite wife, whom Milgrom presumes to be Zippo- rah, only in Num 12:1, long after the original marriage, is because she has just become affiliated with the Israelite community, having joined them at Sinai after having been separated from Moses during his efforts in bringing the people out of Egypt (Numbers [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia/New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990], 93).

86 Talmon, “‘Desert Motif,’” 54; Colm, Shape of Sacred Space, 13; Propp, Exodus I–18, 35.
nal stage is represented by the encounter with Yahweh at the holy mountain, Sinai/Horeb” and that the Israelites’ subsequent sojourn in the wilderness and entry into Canaan belong to the “third and final stage of reaggregation.”67 In support of this view, Hendel points out that it is at Sinai that Israel’s new social and religious identity is forged and consecrated.68 Thus it is at Sinai that the anti-structural status that has previously characterized Israel’s liminality disappears, and, by extension, it is at Sinai that liminality more generally comes to an end. I agree with Hendel on this point and, indeed, would adduce even more evidence to suggest that the making of the covenant at Sinai marks the conclusion of Israel’s liminal period. Note, first, that while the Israelites do continue to experience liminal-like ordeals after leaving Sinai, these ordeals are not depicted in the same way as were the ordeals the Israelites experienced before Sinai, which, as is typical in liminality, were tests imposed on the community by its spiritual authorities (Moses, Aaron, and God). Rather, the post-Sinai ordeals are construed as examples of the people putting Yahweh on trial, demanding more and greater assurances of God’s power and presence. For example, in Num 11:4–35, we find a story about the Israelites’ experiencing hunger in the post-Sinai period that parallels in certain respects the pre-Sinai story of Exod 16:1–36 (the story of how the Israelites hungered in the wilderness of Sin). But while the Exod 16 account is full of liminal features—the characteristically liminal ordeal of fasting; the suggestion that Yahweh is testing the Israelites within the context of this ordeal (אכזב, Exod 16:4)—the Num 11 narrative has a very different sense. The people in Num 11:4–6 hunger not because they lack food, as in Exodus, but because they are tired of eating the same food, the manna God causes to fall from the heavens day in and day out. They are not suffering because of a characteristically liminal ordeal; they are suffering because of an ingrate and churlish nature. For Moses, moreover, this seems to suggest that the community is testing Yahweh and has found the deity wanting (hence the people are said to have rejected Yahweh in Num 11:20), and Yahweh is similarly described as regarding this incident and several other post-Sinai instances of complaining as tests the people have imposed on the deity (טהל וֹא), Num 14:22).

It is also the case that, while there is some of the revelation of sacred knowledge characteristic of liminality in the post-Sinai parts of the exodus narrative, there is not much compared to the massive amount of revelation associated with the Sinai event.69 Furthermore, it is not clear how much liminal-like

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68 Especially through Moses’ offering of sacrifice and his throwing of the collected bowls of blood on God’s altar and on the congregation in Exod 24:3–8; see further my discussion below.
wandering the authors of the exodus tradition envision as being a part of Israel's post-Sinai experience. Rather, the people are depicted as spending the bulk of their time at one location, Kadesh. Kadesh, moreover, is not a particularly good exemplar of the typically liminal space of wilderness, given that it is an oasis location with three major springs. Finally, it is important to note that one of the major themes of the Bible's post-Sinai exodus account concerns the killing off of the original exodus generation (see, e.g., Num 14:26–35; 26:63–65) and not the reaggregation or reintegration of this previously liminal community.

Hence my agreement with Hendel that we locate the Israelites' movement out of liminality at the time of their departure from Sinai. Like Hendel, moreover, I would identify the ritual of Exod 24:3–8—when Moses offers sacrifice and then throws the collected bowls of blood on God's altar and on the congregation—as crucial in effecting Israel's transition from a liminal to a reaggregated state. I would further point out the degree to which this sacrificial act parallels Zipporah's act of circumcision in Exod 4:24–26, which is also a ritualized moment involving blood sacrifice that propels the previously liminal Moses into his reaggregate identity as the leader who will bring his people out of bondage. More significantly, I would argue that the Sinai account seems to offer a parallel to Zipporah's disappearance within the Moses narrative immediately following the reintegration of Moses in Exod 4:27–31, to wit: Miriam being deposed from a position of elevated status almost immediately after the newly reaggregated Israelites leave God's holy mountain in Num 10:12.

The crucial text is found in Num 12, a story set in terms of chronology only a short time after the Israelites' departure from Sinai (according to Num 10:33, there is an initial three-day journey from Sinai to a place eventually named Kibroth-hattaavah and then a subsequent march of unknown duration to the site of the Num 12 account, Hazereth). At Hazereth, Miriam and Aaron are said to challenge Moses' position of authority within their community. As commentators have often pointed out, the difficulties in interpretation associated with this challenge are legion. For example, two different reasons are given

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90 This position, on my part as well as Hendel's, might seem to stand in contradiction to the claim of Propp I earlier embraced: that in the typical rite of passage, the participant returns to the starting point, which, as Propp understands it, means that Israel's rite of passage begins with the people's descent into Egypt at the end of Genesis and concludes with their return to Canaan in the first chapters of Joshua. As Propp himself notes, however, the trek to Sinai is "a return to Canaan in miniature" (Exodus 1–18, 35 n. 14). Thus Israel can metaphorically be said to have returned "home" at Sinai, and the expected rites-of-passage pattern can be understood as fulfilled. See further Mark S. Smith, with contributions by Elizabeth M. Bloch-Smith, The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus (JSOTSup 239; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), passim.

91 Fretheim also notes a possible parallel between Exod 4:24–26 and 24:1–8 (Exodus, 79).

92 The bibliography is extensive. In addition to the standard commentaries, see the following recent analyses: Bernhard W. Anderson, "Miriam's Challenge," BRev 10, no. 3 (June 1994): 16, 55;
for Miriam’s and Aaron’s defiance: first, Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses because of his “Cushite wife”; second, they question Moses’ right to serve as Yahweh’s sole spokesperson within the Israelite community. “Has not,” they ask, “he [Yahweh] spoken through us also?” (Num 12:2). As the text continues, however, the initial concern that was expressed about Moses’ marriage seems to be forgotten and the focus becomes the question of Yahweh’s appropriate spokespersons. According to Num 12:6–8, God directly speaks to this issue, singling Moses out as unique because Moses alone speaks with God “mouth to mouth” (לוֹ שׂא יְהֹוָה יְדָעָה). Then according to Num 12:9, “the anger of Yahweh was kindled against them [Miriam and Aaron]” (emphasis mine) because of their affront. But as God’s anger manifests itself, in Num 12:10–16, only Miriam is punished, afflicted with leprosy, some sort of skin disease, and then shut out of the Israelite camp for seven days. Aaron, conversely, remains unharmed and is not rebuked; indeed, he seems to retain the authority to speak out as an intercessor (Num 12:11). This inconsistancy has been another major point of confusion for interpreters of the passage.93 It is particularly disturbing for those who see Aaron as the primary instigator of the Num 12:2–9 confrontation, a reading based on the fact that Aaron’s name comes before Miriam’s in Num 12:4 and 6.94

If, though, we understand this passage as occurring at a point in the exodus narrative after Israel’s period of liminality has ended and during a period of

93 Milgrom, for example, suggests that only Miriam is punished because, according to the verb form in Num 12:1 (יִלְלָה), only Miriam spoke out against Moses’ wife (Numbers, 93; see similarly Cross, Canaanite Myth, 204). Yet Milgrom simultaneously wishes to claim that the real challenge of the Num 12 pericope is the challenge to Moses’ sole leadership mounted by Miriam and Aaron together in v. 2. If this is so, then the question of why both were not punished remains. Alternatively, Robert R. Wilson considers the role ascribed to Aaron in mounting a challenge against Moses to be secondary (Prophecy and Society, 155), which he claims explains why Aaron is absent from the punishment section of the story. Unfortunately, however, Wilson’s argument here suffers from circularity, given that one of Wilson’s primary pieces of evidence for considering Aaron to be secondary in the Num 12 narrative is that he is absent from the punishment episode.
94 Codices Vaticanus and Alexandrinus, however, place Miriam’s name first in 12:4 (brought to my attention by Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? 65 n. 66).
reaggregation, then the punishing of Miriam alone—even the punishing of Miriam alone despite the possible role of Aaron as the incident's principal instigator—is not so hard to understand. Both Miriam and Aaron have indeed previously been assigned the label "prophet" that in certain respects designates them as spokespersons for God: Aaron in Exod 7:1 and Miriam in Exod 15:20. But in Miriam's case, that label was assigned only within the context of liminal anti-structure, during a point in the narrative when she, although a woman, could assume an otherwise almost exclusively male role. Now, in Num 12, when liminality has come to an end, Miriam's claims about her prophetic stature within a reaggregated community are perceived as presumptuous, and far more presumptuous than are Aaron's, for while he has only misconstrued the nature of his relationship to God as compared to Moses', she both has been guilty of this misconstruing and has overstepped the bounds of gender.\textsuperscript{95} It is for this double transgression that Miriam is so harshly punished, and it is because he is less reprobate within Turner's logic of rites of passage that Aaron emerges from this episode essentially unscathed. In fact, throughout the subsequent chapters of Numbers, Aaron appears again and again alongside Moses in a position of leadership among the people, indicating that his mounting of the Num 12 challenge has done him no apparent harm.\textsuperscript{96} The now-disempowered Miriam, conversely, appears only once more in the exodus story, in Num 20:1, to die.

The Bible thus does admit the possibility that women could assume the role of prophet within Israelite society and, in the case of Zipporah, may even intimate the possibility of a woman taking on priest-like functions. But the biblical record also suggests that the Israelites could imagine women as occupying these sorts of roles only within the context of some very specific conditions. Historically, the conditions required were the kind of period of destabilization or decentralization during which women can generally achieve a more elevated status and find opportunities for a greater exercise of power. Literally, the conditions required were a narrative containing a liminal phase in which the characteristically liminal experience of anti-structure allowed women to be depicted as holding positions within their communities that in the reaggregated sections of the text they would otherwise be denied.

\textsuperscript{95} Although her overall analysis differs from mine, it is interesting to note that Exum also speaks of Miriam's overstepping of gender boundaries in Num 12 in order to explain why only she, and not Aaron, is punished ("Second Thoughts," 86).

\textsuperscript{96} E.g., Num 13:26; 14:2, 5, 26; 15:33; 16:3, 11, 16–22, 36–40, 41–50; 17:1–11; 18:1–7; 19:1; 20:2, 6, 8, 10.