

## Appendix Four

**Women's Voices/Prophetic Voices: Women as Prophets/Women as Other  
OLDT613, Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics  
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WUNRN, Women's United Nation Report Network  
<http://www.wunrn.com>

UN Study focus of WUNRN  
Factual Aspects  
Social Disqualification  
**F.2. Prohibition from Functions**

### Prologue

According to a CEDAW<sup>1</sup> study, "it is the cultural framework of religious values and beliefs that most hindered women's part in public life; such discrimination is based on abusive interpretations which assume gender inequality and male supremacy. Religious and priestly functions are reserved for men in most religions including traditional beliefs of many tribes on all continents." According to the U.N. Study, "Cultural or religious stereotypes prevent women from exercising their vote in some countries; men try to influence them or even vote in their name; so many women lose interest in politics."<sup>2</sup>

This paper proposes to look at women in a particular religious function, that of prophet. First we will look at the function in the context of the ancient near East, defining prophet as the function appears in the Hebrew Bible, and by examining three particular women prophets found in the Hebrew Bible, including whether and how women faced discrimination in becoming prophets or as prophets. We will ask

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<sup>1</sup> Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.wunrn.com/factual/aspects/ff2.htm>

what a careful reading of their poems and stories can teach us about claiming our own prophetic voices today. Then we will look at social patterns and communication models for what they can tell us about what might predict, create or sustain women as prophets. We will sketch the prophetic function as performed by women in the Jewish and Christian traditions in very brief historical outline in the interim 2500 years, and then review the function of prophet as, or if, performed by women in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

### **Prophets in an ancient near Eastern context**

#### **What is a prophet?**

We know little about the ways people became prophets in ancient times and have little descriptive detail about prophetic behaviors. We know little about how the prophet interacted with or functioned in society. "We are uncertain about what the prophets did (or thought they were doing) for their society, and the society's reactions to their activities are often obscure. In short, most of the social dimensions of Israelite prophecy remain unclear."<sup>3</sup> We will look only in general about what the social sciences can tell us about social location and communication in the time period or in similar situations and can extrapolate from that.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 2.

The Bible gives us an initial two-fold definition: someone who speaks for or as a messenger of God, and whom we will recognize because the prophet's words will prove true.

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die." You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?" If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.<sup>4</sup>

Another view of a prophet is not just one who foretold, as in a seer, but one who forth told or spoke boldly, who said the things that those in power did not want to hear. King Ahab, of dubious biblical reputation, remarks of the prophet, Micaiah, "I hate him, for he never prophesies anything favorable about me, but only disaster."<sup>5</sup>

### **Women prophets in the Ancient near East**

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 18: 15-22, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). This is Moses speaking, although the text dates from hundreds of years after the death of Moses.

<sup>5</sup> I Kings 22:8b, NRSV.

In the ancient Near East, prophets in the countries of Mesopotamia adjoining Israel were those who were messengers from the gods to the king or to the nation, often "by means of prophetic frenzy."<sup>6</sup> In nearby Mari, on the Euphrates River, where the archeological finds of the royal archives with hundreds of clay tablets dating from the period 1790-1745 BCE give us written descriptions, prophets were described as being in an ecstatic trance, or having dreams or mystical visions, or speaking through some oracular seizure, similar to many instances of the prophets described in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>7</sup> While there seemed to be more reliance on omens and incantations in other cultures, still the prophets in ancient Israel were not that different in activities from prophets in neighboring countries. We don't know if prophets in other lands spoke as boldly for other gods and as courageously to kings as Israelite prophets spoke for YHWH, but in Israel a prophet spoke for YHWH alone, and depended on YHWH for safety when speaking so boldly to kings.<sup>8</sup>

Women and men were prophets in Mari and both seemed to function in three different ways: as respondent, as ecstatic, or as speaker for a given deity.<sup>9</sup> A respondent appeared at the "inspection of the omens," while the ecstatic delivered

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<sup>6</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, "Ancient Near Eastern Patterns in Prophetic Literature," in Robert P. Gordon, ed., *This Place Is Too Small for Us*, (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1995), p. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Weinfeld, p.35-40. Also, Pamela Scalise, "Circling the Prophets: Refocusing the Definitions of Who They Were and What They Did," *Review and Expositor*, 97, Fall 2000, p. 434-7.

<sup>8</sup> Following Judaism's convention for not speaking the name of God, I use YHWH without the vowels.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard Frank Batto, *Studies on Women at Mari*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 119-22.

her oracle and the speaker delivered the messages that came through other (undefined) means, often dreams, from the gods to the king.<sup>10</sup> The person's social status and the form of prophecy were important to Babylonians who ruled in Mari, but in the traditions of Mari, women's prophecies were apparently accepted without question or discrimination.<sup>11</sup> So in pre-Biblical times, based on the evidence of Mari, women's prophetic roles and voices were not restricted.

### **Women as Biblical prophets**

According to the Deuteronomy passage summarized above, by definition, women can and do serve as prophets without other qualification. The Biblical record, as we have it however, does not reflect that equality between genders. Only four women are explicitly named as prophets in the Hebrew Bible: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and Noadiah, compared to the twenty-nine male prophets whose names we know.<sup>12</sup> That they appear at all from those pre-exilic, tribal days tells us *these* women's voices were important and valued. Was it because the power of their poetry or stories was important or central that these women's voices survive so strongly through the centuries, versus the later experience of women being marginalized or made invisible? We cannot be certain.

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<sup>10</sup> Batto, p. 122-3.

<sup>11</sup> Batto, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Ackerman, "Why is Miriam Also Among the Prophets? (And is Zipporah among the Priests?)" *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 121/1, 2002, p. 48. There are both female and male prophets whose names we do not know. When we know someone's name, it's important.

The scriptures that tell the stories of the women prophets do serve as key passages in the study of the Bible, and the poems of Exodus 15 and Judges 5 about Miriam and Deborah respectively are considered among the oldest written texts in the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Miriam is the "first person—not the first woman, but the first person—in the Hebrew Bible given this title [prophet] in its general sense."<sup>14</sup> Deborah is the only person, and woman, to be judge, prophet, poet *and* military co-leader in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>15</sup> Huldah is the prophet who confirmed the "world's first archaeological discovery: a scroll found in the Temple in Jerusalem during the reign of King Josiah at the end of the seventh century BCE. ... She authorized the text that during centuries to come would develop, through a long and complicated process, into the Bible we now have."<sup>16</sup>

Somehow, the power of their voices and actions survived despite the efforts of editors of later periods to silence them.

The rabbinical tradition, to which gender equality is alien, relates to the Biblical tradition of female prophets from a completely different viewpoint. ... The sages ... sought to minimize and diminish the image of extraordinary women who had been known for generations as prophets, judges and poets. They accomplished this by means of

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<sup>13</sup> Hackett dates these both to the twelfth-eleventh centuries. Jo Ann Hackett, "There Was No King in Israel" in Michael D. Coogan, ed., *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> Leila Leah Bronner, "Valorized or Vilified? The Women of Judges in Midrashic Sources," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> Phyllis Trible, "Take Back the Bible" in *Review and Expositor*, 97, Fall 2000, p. 425.

interpretations that obfuscated the uniqueness of these women, underplayed the significance of their prophecies, replaced the beauty of their spirits with the beauty of their bodies, and often even cast aspersions on their behavior and morals, portraying them in a humiliating and hostile light.<sup>17</sup>

Even though rabbinic and later Christian traditions have subsequently denigrated women's voices and roles, as we listen to these women's voices as prophets we may open an opportunity for women now to claim their own voices in religious functions.

### **Miriam**

"Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."<sup>18</sup> While the actions of this passage, known as Miriam's Song, would be dated chronologically to the Late Bronze Age, circa 1300-1200 BCE, the text itself is dated as one of the oldest pieces of writing in the Hebrew Bible to the twelfth-eleventh centuries BCE.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars hold that the very retention of the poem's ending with Miriam's actions, "in the presence of the

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<sup>17</sup> Rachel Elijor, "Female Prophets in the Bible and Rabbinical Tradition: Changing Perspectives," <http://www.culturaljudaism.org/ccj/articles/22>, linked 1/21/06. See also Bronner.

<sup>18</sup> Exodus 15: 20-21, NRSV

<sup>19</sup> J. Gerald Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: who is seconding whom?" in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p. 187. The text is probably a fusion of the Jahwist (J) and Elohist (E) sources.

Mosaic avalanche, argues for both its antiquity and authority."<sup>20</sup> Others believe that "once upon an early time, before editors got jobs, the entire Song of the Sea, not just the first stanza [Exodus 15:20-21], was ascribed to Miriam and the women of Israel. Later, redactors (editors) who were intent upon elevating Moses took the song right out of her mouth and gave it to him—to Moses, the inarticulate one—in company with the sons of Israel."<sup>21</sup> The whole of Exodus 15 then sounds much like the storm god poems found in neighboring Ugaritic epics.<sup>22</sup> Songs celebrating the victorious warrior, in this case, God over water and chaos, are also part of a theme found for the Israelite women in a number of instances.<sup>23</sup>

Exodus 15 is a key passage in the demarcation of freedom for the Israelite slaves, and serves as a finale of the Passover celebration in current day. Since the Exodus writings have not been corroborated by archeological evidence, it is the power of the story of Miriam as woman, prophet, poet, musician, dancer, and leader that has contributed to the story's continued presence through the centuries. Did Miriam as a prophet dance into an ecstatic, prophetic frenzy, leading the people out through the sea as Moses held up his rod to part the waters? If we read

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<sup>20</sup> Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p. 171

<sup>21</sup> Trible, "Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows," p. 172. See also Janzen's article, p. 187-99, for a concurring literary analysis of verses 20-21 as analepsis that also supports the conclusion.

<sup>22</sup> Hackett in Coogan, p. 158.

<sup>23</sup> Drorah O'Donnell Setel, "Exodus" in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, ed., *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded ed, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992, p. 35-6. See Judges 5, I Samuel 2:1-10, and with tragic results, Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:34-40.

Exodus 15:20-21 (quoted above) as the first stanza of the poem, as a call by Miriam, to "sing," then verses 1ff are the response by the people, "I sing."

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name. "Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone."<sup>24</sup>

Was it Miriam's dancing, drumming and singing that gave the people courage to move in between the walls of water and across the sea, or that gave them the power to claim their freedom after they were on the other side? Miriam also shouted, testified, and bore witness (translated in v. 20 as answered).<sup>25</sup> In this context Miriam's prophetic role was two-fold: as poet/song leader and as witness.

One contemporary musical setting of this story captures this well:

And Miriam the prophet took her timbrel in her hand,  
and all the women followed her just as she had planned,  
and Miriam raised her voice in song; She sang with praise and might:  
We've just lived through a miracle; (yelled) We're going to dance tonight!!  
Chorus: And the women dancing with their timbrels,  
followed Miriam as she sang her song,  
sing a song to the One whom we've exalted,  
Miriam and the women danced and danced the whole night long.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Exodus 15: 1-5, NRSV

<sup>25</sup> Strong's concordance online at [www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com). Accessed on 1/28/2006.

<sup>26</sup> Debbie Friedman, *Miriam's Song*, <http://www.lyricsdownload.com/debbie-friedman-miriam-s-song-lyrics.html> accessed 1/25/2006. The music is available through links from <http://www.debbiefriedman.com/discography.htm>.

While the historicity of the Exodus story is shaky and details of Miriam's life are sketchy, the freedom story, Miriam's song and her title as prophet survive together. In this time of great change for the people of Israel, from slavery to freedom, a woman poet, singer and dancer could step forward as a leader and a prophet. The traditions of women's victory songs carry through here, and continue in the time of the judges and kings, as we will see next for Deborah.<sup>27</sup> Of course, following later patriarchal editorial redaction, much of Miriam's power has been diluted or hidden. Still, without Miriam, saving her baby brother, Moses, there wouldn't have been a Moses, and therefore no story of the people of Israel would follow.

## **Deborah**

The name Deborah means 'bee' coming from a Hebrew root word meaning 'to speak,' especially 'in the sense of orderly motion,' an apt name for the only woman who was a judge, as well as a prophet.<sup>28</sup> The story of Deborah's time is told twice, once in narrative in Judges 4 and then with different details as a poem in Judges 5. Some scholars date the poem as possibly nearly contemporaneous with the Iron Age I (1200-1100 BCE) actions it describes, while suggesting that Judges 4 narrative may have been written by Deuteronomistic Historians as much as 500

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<sup>27</sup> This tradition also is noted in the story of the daughters of Jephthah in Judges 11 and the women singing and dancing over David and Saul's victories in I Samuel 18.

<sup>28</sup> Strong's concordance #01683, 01682, 01696 online at [www.crosswalk.com](http://www.crosswalk.com). Accessed on 1/28/2006.

years later.<sup>29</sup> To put the poem in its cultural context, scholars have drawn parallels to Arabic/nomadic war songs and to fourteenth century BCE Ugaritic poems about the warrior goddess, Anat.<sup>30</sup>

The poem in particular is full of powerful, although not always pleasant, female imagery and actions: Deborah gives the command from YHWH to Barak to raise an army to fight the Canaanites and she prophesies that a woman will have the victory when he hesitates and insists that Deborah come along; Jael drives a tent peg through the Canaanite general Sisera's head, claiming the victory; and finally Sisera's mother wonders what is taking him so long to return from the war, that perhaps he is dividing the spoils of war—captive women.

Then Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying: "When locks are long in Israel, when the people offer themselves willingly— bless the Lord! "Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the Lord I will sing, I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.

"Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water. The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai, before the Lord, the God of Israel.

"In the days of Shamgar son of Anath, in the days of Jael, caravans ceased and travelers kept to the byways. The peasantry prospered in Israel, they grew fat on plunder, because you arose, Deborah, arose as a mother in Israel. When new gods were chosen,

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<sup>29</sup> Hackett in Coogan, ed. p. 135, 158, and Ackerman, p. 54, suggests that Judges 4 is 500 years later. Various others put the difference only 100 years apart, with Judges 5 being not as old.

<sup>30</sup> Morris Seale, "Deborah's Ode and the Ancient Arabian Qasida," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 83, Dec. 1982, p. 343-7, and J. Glen Taylor, "The Song of Deborah and Two Canaanite Goddesses," *JSOT* 23, 1982, p. 99-108. Seale makes the linguistic as well as cultural parallel to Arabic poems, while Taylor makes the links to Anat, including the note that Shamgar is son of Anat in Judges 5:6.

then war was in the gates. Was shield or spear to be seen among forty thousand in Israel?

My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel who offered themselves willingly among the people. Bless the Lord. "Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys, you who sit on rich carpets and you who walk by the way. To the sound of musicians at the watering places, there they repeat the triumphs of the Lord, the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel. "Then down to the gates marched the people of the Lord."<sup>31</sup>

Deborah not only sings the poem, emphasizing a similarity to Miriam's prophetic voice, but in the poem she is called on to sing the call to war as part of her own prophecy. "Awake, awake, Deborah! Awake, awake, utter a song! Arise, Barak, lead away your captives, O son of Abinoam."<sup>32</sup>

Deborah then is dually a prophet and a judge, essentially the executive director, area manager, rule giver and arbiter. Her role as prophet, like Miriam, is also that of poet and song leader, as well as giver of encouragement and of warning. Deborah did most of her work from near her home village, sitting under a palm tree up in the hill country. The information that Deborah does her work under a tree reminds us that the tree is a powerful female symbol, especially of Asherah, the Canaanite goddess who also has been called the consort of YHWH in archeological finds of the period.<sup>33</sup> The archeological finds of the Israelite hill

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<sup>31</sup> Judges 5: 1-11

<sup>32</sup> Judges 5: 12

<sup>33</sup> William Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), p. 162-163.

villages also give insight into women's roles during the time of Deborah, which we will explore below.

## **Huldah**

The prophecies of Huldah date to the eighteenth year of the reign of King Josiah, who reigned from ca. 639 to 609 BCE and are recorded both by the Deuteronomistic Historian and the Chronicler.<sup>34</sup> Her prophecy is not a poem, but is an oracular, and poetic, response to the question raised by King Josiah upon being presented with a hitherto unknown book of 'torah' or law.

So the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she resided in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter, where they consulted her.

She declared to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus says the Lord, I will indeed bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants—all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read.

Because they have abandoned me and have made offerings to other gods, so that they have provoked me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched.

But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the Lord, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the Lord, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the Lord.

Therefore, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster

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<sup>34</sup> Coogan, p. 450.

that I will bring on this place." They took the message back to the king.<sup>35</sup>

Clearly Huldah is well-known to the powers that be, either through her own prophetic work or through her social position being related to the keeper of the wardrobe, who probably was a relatively important court official. Her foresight as a prophet can be questioned somewhat in that Josiah died violently in battle in 609 BCE, and she had assured Josiah that he would be gathered to his ancestors in peace, although one scholar calls that portion of her speech not prophecy but merely to a formulaic priestly turn of phrase.<sup>36</sup> The portion about "disaster on this place" could refer to the destruction of the temple in 587 BCE, that Josiah did not live to see, which editors interpreted as God's blessing to Josiah. Both suggest limited editorial redaction. In part since this passage was written at roughly the same time as the events described, "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."<sup>37</sup>

One interesting question, given the differences in dating of Josiah's reforms between II Kings and II Chronicles, is what was the text that Huldah did indeed verify as the book of the law of God? While early scholars said that it was the

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<sup>35</sup> II Kings 22: 14-20 NRSV

<sup>36</sup> John Priest, "Huldah's Oracle," *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. XXX, no. 3, July 1980, p. 366-8. Of course, if she gets part of a prophecy wrong does that mean she's not a prophet?

<sup>37</sup> Ackerman, p. 54.

entire book of Deuteronomy, later scholars began to question whether in fact the whole of Deuteronomy could fit on one scroll and proposed that it was only part, chapters 5-26, 28, based on the purges carried out by Josiah afterwards.<sup>38</sup> But the account in Chronicles dates the purges to the twelfth year of Josiah's reign and the discovery of the scroll came after. One scholar makes a case that based on Huldah's oracle in response to the scroll, that the scroll contained the song of Moses from Deuteronomy 32, since the substance of her oracle mirrors the ideas found there.<sup>39</sup>

For those women who sought the feminine images of Asherah as YHWH's consort, the irony of the woman prophet's verification of the scroll is that Josiah's purges tore down all of the local high places and the asherah or sacred trees that had been part of women's local or household worship, and mandated centralized worship at the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>40</sup> This certainly made the Babylonian destruction of the Jerusalem temple all the more devastating, thirty or so years later, because local places of worship were also gone.

Huldah's prophetic role cast her as catalyst, interpretive authority, and intermediary between God and king. In this she is similar to other male prophets in the monarchic period. In some respects we might regard her as more successful

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<sup>38</sup> Jack Lundbom, "The Lawbook of the Josianic Reform," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol 38, 1976, p. 293.

<sup>39</sup> Lundbom, p. 296-302. Compare the substance of Deut. 32: 15-22 with II Kings 22:16-17.

<sup>40</sup> See Dever for an archeological review of the importance and use of the asherah in folk or household religious practices.

than some of her male colleagues, because Josiah actually paid attention to her prophecy, and took action.

### **Women's Social Setting and Functions in the Ancient Near East**

Because the times and places in which women prophets lived have an impact on the functions they can perform, it is important to put women prophets of Biblical times in context not only relative to their geographic neighbors, but also relative to their lives in their own society as much as we can. While the specifics vary, one of the critical similarities among the times and settings for each of the women prophets, Miriam, Deborah and Huldah, is that there was great social upheaval, and authority was either not centralized (Miriam/Deborah) or was emergent or transitioning (Huldah). "Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, periods of what has been termed social dysfunction are actually periods when women's status is relatively higher than in settled times."<sup>41</sup> Hierarchies may break down; talent may become more important than gender; local actions may suit better than centralized ones: all of which would give woman a greater opportunity for participation and leadership.<sup>42</sup> This does not mean that all women become leaders, but that the opportunity presents itself for some individuals who might have been marginalized in more stable times. "Pioneer" periods in our own more

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<sup>41</sup> Jo Ann Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women," in Clarissa W. Atkinson, Constance H. Buchanan and Margaret Miles, ed., *Immaculate and Powerful*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), p.19.

<sup>42</sup> Hackett, "In the Days of Jael," p. 19

recent history have been times when women's roles have been less constrained or when women must take over when the men get killed. Conversely it is probable that the reason that we hear no more about Huldah is that the centralization and control of worship that happened with Josiah's reforms shut down the threshold of possibilities for a woman prophet.<sup>43</sup> When a patriarchy has things well under control, the woman prophet does not emerge.

Archeology and anthropology from the Near East also contribute to our understanding. Certainly in the times of Deborah, or most of the Israelite pre-monarchic era, the household was "the central institution for most economic, social, political, and cultural aspects of human existence."<sup>44</sup> While archeologists cannot necessarily tell who made what, it is clear from the evidence that females played a "vital and active role" in all aspects of household "economic life: producing materials, allocating them, and transforming them into consumables."<sup>45</sup> When a woman is in charge of the economics in this way, then she has more control, and perhaps the self-esteem and prestige that goes with that, and male dominance may be a "public attitude," but not a functional reality.<sup>46</sup>

Another way of viewing these times of social dysfunction would be to regard them as a society's liminal periods. Liminal periods on the personal level are

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<sup>43</sup> Ackerman, p. 59.

<sup>44</sup> Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 139

<sup>45</sup> Meyers, p. 145.

<sup>46</sup> Meyers, p. 175. Anthropologists are comparing this to small Greek mountain villages studied today.

times of transition such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. On a societal level a liminal period is more a model of stages of separation, threshold, and reincorporation or reintegration.<sup>47</sup> This model describes the times in which Miriam, Deborah and Huldah all lived. During the liminal state the defining characteristic is "ambiguity," or "betwixt and between" and people are absent "marks of rank or distinction."<sup>48</sup> Certainly the Exodus was a liminal time, so patriarchal distinctions were in abeyance, and an individual such as Miriam could step into a role that she would otherwise have been denied.<sup>49</sup>

### **Prophets in an Oral Culture**

Another important element in reviewing prophetic roles is that Biblical prophets existed in an oral culture. "The magic of oral cultures lies in intimate connection. Word and spirit, spirit and being, words and essence, words and things: all are interrelated."<sup>50</sup> Oral culture is different from most of ours today, not only "temporally, but temperamentally," not "merely by reason of position in time and of social institutions generally but also specifically by reason of the way in which it is oriented toward the word itself."<sup>51</sup> A critical element for prophets is that "truth is relational in oral cultures. ... The credibility of the message [is] based

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<sup>47</sup> Ackerman, p. 64.

<sup>48</sup> Ackerman, p. 67.

<sup>49</sup> Ackerman, p. 71.

<sup>50</sup> M. Rex Miller, *The Millennium Matrix*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, quoting Walter Ong, p. 19.

entirely on the credibility of the messenger."<sup>52</sup> Oral culture is also dialogical, not linear, and meaning grows out of shared experiences.<sup>53</sup>

In an oral culture, it is not coincidental that the oldest extant pieces of biblical texts were poems and nor is it odd that prophets were poets. Poetry is also not linear and it opens the threshold between now and not now, human and divine, in a way prose cannot. Because prophets also aimed to persuade or convince, all of the tools of a good extemporaneous public speaker would be hallmarks of prophetic speech. We might "expect formulaic language and a definite rhythm in the speech pattern. ... We would also expect to find riddles, puns, soundplays, rhetorical questions, and dialogues that are marks of performance by a speaker trying to engage and hold the audience."<sup>54</sup> Repetition, patterns, and recapping are all necessary in oral cultures.<sup>55</sup> "Oral poets compose as they speak, according to patterns, often to the accompaniment of music, with a basic rhythm, but with significant variation both in their repetition and in their consistency."<sup>56</sup> Poetry is also easier to memorize and retain because of all the elements that make it more persuasive and powerful, so in a strong oral culture, these ancient prophetic poems would have been easily preserved. The voice of a woman poet/prophet in an oral

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<sup>52</sup> Miller, p. 27.

<sup>53</sup> Miller, p. 96-118.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence Boadt, "The Poetry of Prophetic Persuasion: Preserving the Prophet's Persona," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 59, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Boadt, p. 7.

culture could be a powerful voice of commentary or for change, and carries also the resonance of voices of mothers' authority and calm.

Conversely, oral culture could limit information access and become hierarchical and controlling. "Since popular literacy in the West became a reality only during the last two hundred years, for some [nearly three thousand years] ... common folk had access to the Bible primarily through the oral, aural, and visual media."<sup>57</sup> For women, this meant that they heard the scriptures only during worship, and "their oral and aural hermeneutics were dismissed as unimportant."<sup>58</sup> Just as women's voices were silenced, the way women heard and understood was disregarded as well. In order to truly understand what the messages of the prophets were, we must learn how "to analyze the negotiation of meaning in discursive contexts, the retelling of stories to meet the particular needs of an audience, or the thought processes that lie behind oral transmission."<sup>59</sup> Much of our understanding of the Bible, not just of the women prophets, would benefit from an analysis of what oral culture implied or meant for both listeners and speakers.

### **Interim**

Following the centralization of worship and the codification of the law after Huldah spoke for God, there is one more woman prophet mentioned briefly in the

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<sup>57</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, (Mary Knoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 50.

<sup>58</sup> Kwok, p. 51.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Prophetic Books of the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Nehemiah. "Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid."<sup>60</sup> It is unclear whether Noadiah was friend or foe, or a true or false prophet from this passage. As was true with Huldah, since Nehemiah was attempting to rebuild in Jerusalem, circa 440 BCE,<sup>61</sup> Noadiah lived in a liminal period, so her presence is in keeping with the pattern of women prophets appearing in such times of liminal transition. After her, however, no women prophets are named in the Hebrew Bible.

In the early writings of the Christian era, only a few prophets are named, and among them just one woman is named as a prophet, also at a liminal time. Anna was at the Temple along with Simeon when Jesus' parents came "to do for him what was customary under the law."<sup>62</sup> She was a very old devout widow who prayed daily at the temple, and when she saw Jesus she began to "praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."<sup>63</sup>

After Jesus' death, the writers of the Christian canon only mention women who have "the gift of prophecy," but they do not call them prophets. Philip the

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<sup>60</sup> Nehemiah 6:14, NRSV

<sup>61</sup> Coogan, p. 451

<sup>62</sup> Luke 2: 27b: circumcision.

<sup>63</sup> Luke 2:36-38.

evangelist had "four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy," but we have no record of their prophecies.<sup>64</sup> There is also the slave girl who had "a spirit of divination" and followed Paul and Timothy for several days, crying out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."<sup>65</sup> The apostle Paul subsequently casts out the spirit of divination from the woman. Divination was fine, but not if it was done in a foreign god's name.<sup>66</sup> Paul, in his writings to the Romans and to the Corinthians, talks of the gift of prophecy as one among many gifts and cautions about its misuse but does not distinguish between its use by genders: "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness."<sup>67</sup>

It is clear from the historical context and documents since then, that women's roles as prophets, as well as women's roles in many other religious functions, became much more restricted even than described in the ancient Near East, despite societies passing through many times of dysfunction or liminality since circa 60 CE. There were shifts in the idea of what a prophet was to do as the

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<sup>64</sup> Acts 21: 8-9. There is a man who *is* called a prophet, however, later in this chapter.

<sup>65</sup> Acts 16: 16-17

<sup>66</sup> See Carol R. Fontaine, "The Strange Face of Wisdom in the New Testament," in Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem Van Henten, ed., *Recycling Biblical Figures*, (Leiden, Netherlands: Deo Publishing, 1999), p. 213-6.

<sup>67</sup> Romans 12: 6-8, NRSV. See also I Corinthians 12: 4-11 and the cautions in I Corinthians 14.

hierarchy of the Christian church solidified and heretics were suppressed. By the sixth century CE, the gift of prophecy "would be understood as the gift of interpreting the Scriptures in a manner that was both pastoral and practical."<sup>68</sup> This redefinition of course precluded women acting as prophets unless they were in the confines of a women's community or convent or at home, because of the restrictions on women acting as pastors or priests that grew out of the Hellenization of Christianity in the first three centuries CE, and solidified after Christianity became the Roman Empire's state religion under Constantine.

Nonetheless, we do have glimpses of women who continued to have visions and speak for God, although they most often were in the mystical, cloistered traditions, and not out in the world: Theresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, or Catherine of Sienna.<sup>69</sup> After the Protestant reformation, some groups such as the Quakers accepted women's spiritual equality, and through inspiration of the Holy Spirit, their prophecies.<sup>70</sup> "New religious movements in liminal religious eras are usually more open to claims by women than the traditions they seek to reform or oppose. In addition, movements with high regard for the authority of the Holy

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<sup>68</sup> Marie Anne Mayeski, "Let Women Not Despair: Rabanus Maurus on Women as Prophets," *Theological Studies*, vol 58, 1997, p. 242. This contains an excellent historical summary of the progression of the role change, including Rabanus, as Archbishop of Mainz, giving support for women as prophets.

<sup>69</sup> One could say that Joan of Arc was a prophet in the world, and her prophetic vision was what she acted on in leading armies into battle. It proved deadly for her though.

<sup>70</sup> Dale A. Johnson, "Review of *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity*, edited by Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 70, no. 3, September 2002, p. 652.

Spirit or personal experience are often more receptive to women's public speech than those that place a high value on the authority of tradition or Scripture."<sup>71</sup> In Protestant Christianity, this acceptance did open the way for some individual women to become leaders or preachers or prophets, although certainly not all new religious movements were or are open to women's leadership possibilities.

The oral culture became the print culture with the advent of the printing press in 1450. "Here is the spiritual significance of the impact of print's dominance: it established the written word as the ultimate standard of authority."<sup>72</sup> Linear logic becomes the norm, not dialog. Reading imposes a distance on the world. Rationality and functionality follow as word replaces symbol.<sup>73</sup> Print also does not provide for the transmittal of experience in the same way that oral culture and ritual do. Those without access to getting things into print were locked out—and in most cases most women's voices were silenced. Oral culture's model then continues for those locked out of print, or for those institutions that had come of age prior to 1450. Protestant reformation churches are part of the print culture while the Roman Catholic church is more formed by the oral culture, for example.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Johnson, p. 652-3.

<sup>72</sup> Miller, p. 44.

<sup>73</sup> Miller, ch. 2.

<sup>74</sup> Miller, p. 36.

In the 1950's we moved to a broadcast culture with the advent of television. "Television is fluid and continuously reconstructing itself. It retains no memory. ... It synchronizes cultural emotions and perception (which is different from understanding). ... Television's powerful images replace millions of written words."<sup>75</sup> Broadcast culture creates events. Even more so than print, access to contributing or distributing content is restricted. "It is possible to speak through media directly into people's heads and then, like some otherworldly magicians, leave images inside that can cause people to do what they might otherwise never have thought to do."<sup>76</sup> Communication, of course, still happens orally and in print as well as broadcast, and today the digital culture is changing the rules yet again. So, these continuing communication cultural paradigms give us information that we can use in examining and understanding religious, prophetic and other voices.<sup>77</sup>

## **Prophetic Women's Voices Today**

### **Prophetic role redefinition**

"Those of us who try to put words around God's truth as we perceive it are often referred to as prophets. Those who stand up and preach often do so out of a consciousness of the prophetic tradition."<sup>78</sup> Today, in the sociology of religion,

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<sup>75</sup> Miller, p. 59.

<sup>76</sup> Miller, p.59, quoting Jerry Mander in *4 Arguments for the Elimination of Television*.

<sup>77</sup> I highly recommend the book *The Millennium Matrix* for its complete framing of these communication culture paradigms. See also the website: <http://www.millenniummatrix.com>.

<sup>78</sup> Ralph Milton, *Rumors # 382, an e-zine for people of faith with a sense of humor*, Jan 22, 2006 via e-mail. Milton also remarks about Deuteronomy 18: 15-22, quoted in the beginning of this

"the prophetic voice calls those within the nation or institution to account for various injustices, wrongful deeds, or corruptions of the original spirit."<sup>79</sup> These comments reveal a shift back to a definition that is more similar to that of ancient Biblical times. Yet today, in a multicultural world, defining the God for whom the prophet speaks may also be necessary.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global context**

"To the African, God speaks as if He [*sic*] were an African; to the Chinese, God speaks as if He [*sic*] were a Chinese. To all men and women, the Word goes out over against their particular existing environment and their several cultural settings."<sup>80</sup> We are no longer isolated in a small hill village or among a tribe of similar peoples, rather we belong to a multi-cultural, multi-faith, multi-gendered world. We cannot speak as the ancient prophets did in an exclusive way. "The prophets' emphasis on justice and their solidarity with the poor and the oppressed must be affirmed. But their vital weakness—the negative attitude toward other cultures—must not be overlooked."<sup>81</sup>

While there are religious fundamentalists who claim to speak the one truth from their own idea of God, prophetic voices are speaking from around the world,

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paper, "This passage is downright scary. ... this passage seems to imply that the penalty for getting our prophecy wrong is death."

<sup>79</sup> Patricia A. Yeaman, "Prophetic voices: differences between men and women," *Review of Religious Research*, 28 Je 1987, p 367.

<sup>80</sup> Kwok, p. 8, quoting Zhao Zichen, China's best-known Protestant theologian.

<sup>81</sup> Kwok, p. 60, quoting C.S. Song.

from many religious traditions where the prophet's role is to call people to account according to how they are carrying out the commands or ideals of their own religion. Are we caring for the poor, the widowed, and the orphans? Are we working for the healing of the world, *tikkun olam*? Are we honoring the *tawhid* (oneness) of God through our treatment of all God's creation? Are we feeding the hungry or doing small kindnesses? Do we love our neighbor as ourselves? Are we walking the pathways of peace? In the global village, women of faith can speak out for the voiceless and marginalized in this inclusive prophetic way.

### **The Digital Culture**

The new communication paradigm is digital. Digital is interactive, linked, anonymous, iterative, networked, integrated, and multimedia: symbol, print, visual, auditory. It is direct, hands-on, global, anytime, immediate, and active.<sup>82</sup> As more people have access, the digital model opens up communication in a non-hierarchical way that has not been possible since everyone was able to gather in one house in the village. It grants a breadth of information that is comparable to the quantum jump into print, and can have the immediate visceral, visual impact like broadcast. Can digital culture offer a place and a way now for women to speak prophetically? It certainly can offer a threat to governments as a recent news article

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<sup>82</sup> Miller, p. 78-9.

about and petition against the Iranian government shutting down women's internet sites makes evident.<sup>83</sup>

### **Places to Look for Women Prophets Now**

In this digital age if we look for women's voices on religious websites or in places speaking out against injustices, we do not find women who think of themselves or call themselves prophets or prophetic. Search for women and prophets or prophetic women: it is as Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown" or in the prophet's own time, we might add.<sup>84</sup> As a naming, the voices of the women (and feminist men) speaking at the Boston WUNRN regional conference were prophetic voices speaking for women's rights and calling nations and peoples to account for the injustices evident in so many places.<sup>85</sup> Just as in ancient days, women prophets were poets, musicians and dancers, so we should look also for prophetic voices among poets and musicians. We might also find them in women by the water, on the Hill, and in the temple (or church or mosque), as we found Miriam, Deborah or Huldah. They may not call themselves prophets, but perhaps they are. Keep looking and listening. Perhaps we must name women prophets today, and we must call on and support the women of

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<sup>83</sup> <http://www.neww.org.pl/en.php/news/news/1.html?&nw=1996&re=1>, accessed 1/17/2006.

<sup>84</sup> Luke 4:24, NRSV. See Appendix A for some website links that link you to women's voices that may indeed be our prophets.

<sup>85</sup> See <http://www.bostonwunrn.com> for program speaker list.

faith to keep speaking for God to kings and leaders and nations against injustices  
and for peace.

## Appendix A

Websites from searches on women or feminist, and spirituality, or prophet, or prophetic, or poet, all accessed and active as of 1/30/2006. If it looks like and sounds like and acts like a women prophet, is it a woman prophet?

<http://www.bostonwunrn.com> Boston regional conference for WUNRN, 10/8/05.

<http://www.womensspace.org/> Women's space

<http://www.gentlespirit.com/margins/FeministSpirituality/8.html> Feminist Spirituality

<http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/xpax/> Christian + Feminist

<http://www.dike.de/hulda/english.html> Feminist Theology

<http://www.spiritualprogressives.org> Spiritual Progressives

<http://www.progressivechristianity.net/> International progressive Christians

<http://www.tcpc.org/> The Center for Progressive Christianity USA

<http://www.pcnbritain.org.uk/> Progressive Christianity Network UK

<http://www.religioustolerance.org> Religious Tolerance

<http://www.calltorenewal.org> A faith based movement to overcome poverty

<http://www.godspolitics.com> About the book by Jim Wallis, God's Politics

<http://www.sojo.net> Sojourners: faith, politics, culture

<http://www.soulforce.org/> Freedom for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people from religious and political oppression

<http://www.safraproject.org> Sexuality, Gender and Islam

<http://www.muslimwakeup.com/> Seeks to bring together Muslims and non-Muslims in America and around the globe in efforts that celebrate cultural and spiritual diversity, tolerance, and understanding

[http://www.pmuna.org/archives/pmu\\_prayer\\_initiative/index.php](http://www.pmuna.org/archives/pmu_prayer_initiative/index.php)

Towards a gender-fair notion of prayer in Islam

<http://www.tirzahfirestone.com/> Jewish Renewal feminist rabbi

<http://www.shalomctr.org/> Check out "links" to Jewish feminists

<http://radicalfaith.org/> Exploring fundamentals of faith in a changing world

<http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/> Public TV show: faith and reason

<http://www.sofn.org.uk/> Sea of faith network UK

<http://www.quodlibet.net/> Online journal of Christian theology and philosophy—  
look for women???

<http://www.affirmingcatholicism.org.uk/> Anglican community today UK

<http://www.thirdway.org.uk/> Magazine of rigorous Christian thinking on politics,  
society and culture

<http://www.inclusivechurch.net/> Anglican network of those who signed Inclusive  
Church statement

<http://www.thinkingbaptists.com/index.html> Thinking Baptists—not an oxymoron

<http://www.jwa.org/feminism> Jewish Women's Archive

<http://www.lilithmag.com/> Lilith Magazine

<http://bridgesjournal.org/> A Jewish Feminist Journal

<http://www.jofa.org> Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance

<http://www.womenoftheelca.org/cafe/issue0204/internetcafe.html> Links on faith  
and feminism

<http://www.womenpriests.org/default.asp> On ordination of women as priests

<http://www.hds.harvard.edu/jfsr/> Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion

[http://www.beliefnet.com/story/160/story\\_16035\\_1.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/160/story_16035_1.html) feminism and faith

<http://www.beliefnet.com> Website on many faiths

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2136/context/archive> Women's e-news article on feminism in Islam, Judaism and Christianity

<http://www.asmasociety.org> Islamic Culture and Arts

<http://wfnet.org/> Women's Funding Foundation

<http://home.earthlink.net/~sjgess/> Christian Feminist community

[http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma\\_article1.html](http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article1.html) Religion on the Web article and links

<http://www.whosoever.org> An online magazine for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians

<http://www.propheticwomen.com/index.html> An organization: Prophetic Women

<http://www.illustration-agency.com/network/fanny/fanpub2.htm> comic strip: Prophetic Women

<http://www.womenofthekairos.com/index.html> Evangelistic women

<http://www.artarena.force9.co.uk/womenp.htm> Iranian women poets

<http://www.poets.org/> Lots of poets

<http://www.levantinecenter.org/pages/arabwomenpoets.html> Arab women poets

<http://judithpordon.tripod.com/poetry/id222.html> Famous women poets

<http://c.webring.com/hub?ring=wpoets> Webring for women poets

[http://www.poetseers.org/the\\_great\\_poets/women\\_poets](http://www.poetseers.org/the_great_poets/women_poets) Women poets

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_women\\_poets](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_women_poets) List of women poets

<http://www.newi.ac.uk/englishresources/workunits/alevel/poetry/contblkwomen/entity.html> Lesson for study of contemporary black women poets

<http://www.illyria.com/women/vnwpoetbib.html>  
Women poets who served during the Vietnam War

<http://www.brocku.ca/canadianwomenpoets/> Canadian women poets

[http://english.people.com.cn/200307/04/eng20030704\\_119460.shtml](http://english.people.com.cn/200307/04/eng20030704_119460.shtml)  
Article on Chinese women poets

<http://www.english-literature.org/essays/indian-women-writers.html>  
Article on Indian women writers and poets

<http://www.photoaspects.com/woaw/poets/> New women poets

<http://www.wmol.com/whalive/native.htm> Native American women's writing list

<http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/molara.html>  
Article on African women poets

[http://www.sappho.com/poetry/index\\_contemporary.html](http://www.sappho.com/poetry/index_contemporary.html)  
List of lesbian and bisexual women poets

<http://www.debbiefriedman.com/discography.htm>  
Music from Jewish liturgical music writer

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