# WOMEN IN POWER:

# CASE STUDIES FROM THE EARLY PROPHETS

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the intersectionality of biblical interpretation, feminism, and power, specifically as it appears in the narratives of various women in the Early Prophets (Joshua-Kings). Five biblical women were selected for case studies in this survey: Rahab, Deborah, Abigail, Athaliah, and Huldah. Each of these women wields power, whether granted to her by the title of prophet or queen, or by their intellect and intentional action. This thesis aims to understand how that power is portrayed in the original text as well as how it is understood by the rabbinic sages and modern feminist commentators. Although there is a wealth of feminist biblical interpration from the 19th century to present day, there is less schoarlship on the crossover of these three topics. This thesis serves to lift up the voices and experiences of these women by beginning to delve into the impact of their historical context and deriving lessons for contemporary understanding.

## Acknowledgements

After immersing myself and becoming friendly with the women of our sacred text, I dedicate this thesis to three incredible, strong, and opinionated women in my own life:

> My beloved Mom-Mom, Esther Freedman z"l, whose 9th *yahrzeit* coincides with the submission of this thesis. Mom-Mom was a classy lady who loved her family fiercely and showed me what it was to be a gentle and strong matriarch. Her memory is truly a blessing to me.
>
> My mother, Lori Freedman. This woman would move heaven and earth to protect her children and has done so on more than one occasion. She is truly an *Eshet Chayil*, a Woman of Valor. She shared her love of Judaism with us early and often, and has modeled how to live a rich and meaningful Jewish life through her devotion to our family, her career, her friendships, and our community.
>
> My niece, Ilo Pearl, who is almost 4 years old. The curiosity, innocence, and pure joy of young people is always a beautiful thing, but all the more so when it is the next generation of your own family. Ilo is full of hope and promise for the future, hopefully one in which women will not have to shout to be heard.

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This journey has taught me that we may never be prepared for what life has in store, but with the right people by your side, anything can be overcome. In addition to those already mentioned, I am grateful to Amy Cohen, Sarah Berman, Rachel Barnehama, Amanda Greene, and Marcie and Jack Schreibman - amazing friends who are like family and would answer the phone any time of the day or night.

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Finally, to the women I spent so much time with: Rahab, Deborah, Abigail, Athaliah, and Huldah. Learning your stories and understanding the complex dynamics of being a woman in the Bible has been a powerful and awakening experience. May you always be heard and remembered in the chain of our tradition.

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# Introduction

Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, Tzipporah, and the daughters of Zelophehad are among the women visited and revisited as part of the annual Torah reading cycle. These women are referred to in the liturgy, they are examples of Jewish values, and they are models of strong female characters. Torah is certainly a core pillar of the Reform Movement, but less emphasized are the other books that join Torah in making up the Hebrew Bible: *Nevi'im* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings). These books are rich with continued historical narrative, prophetic insight, wisdom from the psalms and proverbs, and numerous women whose stories are not often told.

As the historical narrative continues, from the Books of Joshua to Kings in the context of conquest, settling into the land, and establishing institutions of rule, women play an important role. This thesis will explore models of female characters found in the Early Prophets, specifically looking at the relationship between gender and power, leadership, and authority. I seek to understand how these women are portrayed in the text, the roles they play in the unfolding historical narrative, and lessons that are gleaned from them as models of powerful biblical women.

## *Scope of Research*

The primary sources are the text itself: the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. In engaging with the Hebrew, various translations were consulted, including adaptations of my own translations. Additionally, sources from Talmud and Midrash are connected to each of the women. In particular, in Megillah 14a-15a there is a lengthy discussion of female prophets and women of beauty in which several of the women of this

thesis are mentioned. This discussion reveals certain attitudes and impressions of the rabbinic sages towards these women which will be explored further in the conclusion. For the secondary sources, the dominant scholarship comes from the field of feminist biblical commentary, predominately written by women from the 19th century to the present as previously defined.

This study is a survey, meaning that it does not cover all of the women in the Early Prophets, nor does it offer an in depth account on any one character. Instead, with each woman reviewed, initial impressions are offered, accompanied by a variety of assessments exploring how the woman is understood in the text itself as well as by ancient, medieval, and modern commentators. The following women were selected for the thesis case studies:[1]

- Rahab (Joshua 2; 6:17-25)
- Deborah (Judges 4-5)
- Abigail (II Samuel 25)
- Athaliah (II Kings 11)
- Huldah (II Kings 22)

In order to make a true survey of this section of text, at least one woman was selected from each book.[2] Four of the five women serve a pivotal role in their narrative either by their words or deeds. Not included in that categorization is Athaliah, who, while being a crowned queen, is still a fairly minor character serving as an example of a woman who is not revered or considered a paragon of goodness. In calling on the notion of power, each of these women, either officially or unofficially, asserts some measure of power or authority in their own way.

[1] Listed in biblical order.
[2] For the purposes of brevity, Samuel and Kings were viewed as a single unit.

This will be explored in further detail in each case study. In the Conclusion, common themes will be identified in the context of the larger question of women and power.

One final note on the framing and approach for this thesis: biblical interpretation is not a one-size-fits-all model. Alice Ogden Bellis gracefully presents this sentiment which should be an important reminder any time one sits down to engage with interpretation of any kind, especially of the sacred text:

> Most feminists recognize that no one comes to the task of interpretation detached or neutral. We all bring our beliefs as well as our personal history. This does not make feminists - female or male - different from other interpreters, as if feminist interpretation were ideological and androcentric interpretation universal and objective. Rather, everyone comes to the text with convictions, assumptions, and perspectives. They influence the questions we ask, the way we ask them, the approaches we use to find the answers, and the answers themselves.[3]

[3] Bellis, Alice Ogden. "Feminist Biblical Scholarship." *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament,* edited by Carol L Meyers et al., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing, 2000, pp. 24–32. Pp. 27-28.

# PART I: DEFINING THE FIELD

## The Early Prophets

The Book of Prophets consists of eight books divided into two distinct units known as the *Nevi'im Rishonim* (Early/Former Prophets) and the *Nevi'im Acharonim* (Latter Prophets).[4] As a unit, the Early Prophets contain mostly historical narrative following immediately after Moses' death in Deuteronomy. There are some scholars who refer to this section as Deuteronomistic history, believing that it matches content and form with Deuteronomy in a way that suggests they were originally edited as a single work.[5] While the Early Prophets focus more on a chronological telling of the narrative, the Latter Prophets are more literary in style, dividing the books by prophecy and teachings from individual prophets.

Although a majority of the academic and biblical scholarship fields refer to the *Nevi'im Rishonim* as the Former Prophets, I have chosen to use the translation of Early Prophets, similar to that of bible translator Everett Fox.[6] The terms "former" and "latter" imply a sense of before and after, or first and second. While *rishonim* does translate literally as "first," as in the first prophets, there is not a distinct chronology between the two sections. For example, the Prophet Jeremiah served during the reign of King Josiah, son of Amon, a fact that is stated at the beginning of the Book of Jeremiah but not mentioned in II Kings where King Josiah consults Huldah as a prophet, not Jeremiah.[7] There is clearly overlap

[4] The number of books is dependent on how you count. For this purpose the eight include: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets.
[5] *The Jewish Study Bible*. edited by Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed., New York, Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 431.
[6] Fox, Everett. *The Early Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.* New York, Schocken Books, 2014.
[7] Jeremiah 1:2; II Kings 22. As explored in the chapter on Huldah, the rabbis have much to say as to why Josiah went to Huldah and not Jeremiah if they were indeed contemporaries.

between the Latter Prophets and, specifically, the Book of Kings. Thus, by using the term "early," I am emphasizing the evolving nature of the narrative and the prophetic figures.

The Early Prophets opens with Joshua mourning Moses and preparing the people to finally enter the Promised Land. The first woman of the Early Prophets, and thus of this thesis, appears in Chapter 2 of Joshua. Rahab, a prostitute who hides Joshua's spies from the Canaanite king, becomes not only the first woman of this new section but also the first prophet, albeit unofficially according to the rabbis.[8] The primary theme of the Book of Joshua is conquest of and settling in the land.

In the Book of Judges, as new inhabitants of the land, the Israelites have to establish a system of governance. Among a series of judges or leaders, Deborah emerges as the only female leader and the only titled prophet and judge.[9] Women are particularly prominent in the Book of Judges, in the pre-national Israelite life, including named women such as Deborah, Yael[10], and Delilah[11], and unnamed women such as Jephthah's daughter[12] and Manoah's wife.[13]

As the nation evolves, there is a call for more structured leadership, leading to the establishment of the monarchy. The Book of Samuel, typically split into two sections, follows the prophecy of Samuel and the kingship of Saul and David. The book opens with Hannah, a pious woman who prays for a son, eventually bearing Samuel and dedicating him to God.[14] The story of Hannah, while not explored in this thesis, is told each year as the haftarah reading on Rosh Hashanah. Samuel served as prophet, anointing the first king of

[8] Joshua 2; Rabbis refer to Rahab as a prophet in BT Megillah 14a; see chapter on Rahab for further explanation of her prophetic gift and her narrative.
[9] Judges 4-5; Deborah is the only female judge and only judge who is a prophet.
[10] Judges 4-5, part of Deborah's story.
[11] Judges 16, a Philistine woman involved with Samson.
[12] Judges 11, sacrificed by her father after a promise to God in exchange for a victory.
[13] Judges 13, she receives a vision from God that she'll conceive a son, Samson.
[14] I Samuel 1-2.

Israel, Saul. While at first David was a loyal servant to King Saul, the relationship quickly turned contentious and ended with David's ascent to the throne. David had many women in his life including his first wife and Saul's daughter, Michal, his forbidden lover, Bathsheba, and his smart and beautiful wife, Abigail.[15] Under David, attended by his prophet Nathan, the people and land thrived during this time and anticipated the next generation of leadership from David's son, Solomon.

The Book of Kings is just that, a record of the many kings who continue the line of David. Similar to Samuel, Kings is split into two sections, starting with David's death, Solomon's reign, and the building of the Holy Temple. In addition to being a prolific writer like his father, Solomon is also known for his wisdom.[16] Women appearing before Solomon's court include the Queen of Sheba[17] and the two mothers in conflict over a single child, requiring Solomon to make a judgment of who was the true mother.[18] However, after Solomon, his son, Rehoboam, is unable to maintain unity and there is a separation between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. This schism causes much unrest and divisiveness for several generations. There are many periods where the kings and people worship other gods or fail to follow in the path of Adonai, much to the dismay of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Jezebel[19] and Athaliah[20] are examples of many who stray, and, as female leaders who rule by force, they are not well received. Just a few chapters later, a scroll is brought to the prophet

[15] Michal and Bathsheba appear several times throughout the David narrative. Abigail's presence is only in II Samuel 25, see chapter for more exploration.
[16] David is considered the author of the Book of Psalms; Solomon of Song of Songs, Proverbs, and possibly also Ecclesiastes.
[17] I Kings 10, as a visiting dignitary, she lavished Solomon with gifts after he answers difficult questions and impresses her.
[18] I Kings 2:16-28, deciding in favor of the true mother solidified Solomon's legacy of justice.
[19] II Kings 19, 21, she is known for her baal worship and tumultuous relationship with King Ahab; her death is gruesome and also prophesied by Elijah.
[20] II Kings 22, queen mother turned queen in an extreme sweep of power, see her chapter for further explanation.

Huldah who verifies it as holy and significant, later assumed to be the scroll of Deuteronomy.[21] Finally, the Book of Kings and the Early Prophets concludes with the destruction of the Temple and the beginning of the people's exile from the land, coming full circle from the opening chapters of conquest.

[21] Jezebel, II Kings 19, 21; Athaliah, II Kings 22.

## Feminist Biblical Interpretation

As a basic definition, analysis of biblical texts about women or on matters concerning women comprise the framework for feminist biblical interpretation. While this thesis is not specifically about feminist reading of the Early Prophets, most of the modern scholarship comes from this field and based on the definition above, it is inherent in the desire to learn more about the stories of biblical women. For a fuller understanding of the evolution of feminist hermeneutics, it is helpful to first consider the history of feminism as a social, political, and cultural movement. Carol Meyers aptly summarizes the three waves of feminism, specifically as they relate to the American context and biblical scholarship:

> First-wave feminism of the nineteenth century accompanied the suffragist movement, and second-wave feminism arose from the civil rights and antiwar movements in the 1960s and 1970s. Both those political movements produced feminist biblical scholarship, which is often divided into a similar first-wave and second-wave sequence. Now a third wave of feminist biblical scholarship, beginning in the 1990s, is linked to cultural studies; it is grounded in literary criticism and critical theory and is concerned with political issues.[22]

The nature of each of these waves has impacted scholarly engagement with the Bible in both its study and its symbolism. In the 19th century, the women of the suffrage movement sought to break free from biblically-based bondage, viewing the Bible as the original cause of women's oppression and of systemic patriarchy. Perhaps the most well known example of this is Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Women's Bible*, which suggested that it would be

[22] Meyers, Carol. *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 30.

impossible for political change to come about if the root cause of women's oppression was not addressed.[23] She wrote:

> When, in the early part of the Nineteenth Century, women began to protest against their civil and political degradation, they were referred to the Bible for an answer. When they protested against their unequal position in the church, they were referred to the Bible for an answer.[24]

If the Bible was the constant source of consultation, Stanton wanted it to be understood and interpreted in support of women's equality, or, at the very least, not towards women's subordination. Stanton's *Women's Bible* does not go verse by verse with its commentary, rather focusing exclusively on narratives with women or moments that impact women. Additionally, the commentary of Stanton should be understood in context, in that biblical women who act ruthlessly or inappropriately according to Stanton's standards do not receive support or positive review from Stanton; that would be counterintuitive to her mission to prove the value of women.[25] Other like-minded women joined Stanton in these efforts to bring the voices of biblical women and women of the time to the forefront during this first impactful wave of feminism.[26]

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[23] Stanton, Elizabeth Cady. *The Woman's Bible: A Classic Feminist Perspective*. 1895. Mineola, NY, Dover Publications, 2002.
[24] Ibid., Introduction, pp. 8.
[25] This will be seen in Stanton's review of Athaliah and Yael in particular.
[26] See articles by: Shectman, Sarah. "Feminist Biblical Interpretation: History and Goals." *TheTorah.com*, 2019, www.thetorah.com/article/feminist-biblical-interpretation-history-and-goals; de Groot, Christina. "Deborah: A Lightning Rod for Nineteenth-Century Women's Issues." *Faith and Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Religious Communities*, edited by Michaela Sohn-Kronthaler and Ruth Albrecht, Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2019, pp. 63–98.

It was not until the second wave that more women were sufficiently academically credentialed to be able to break, however minimally, into a largely male dominated field.[27] This wave, often considered to be launched by the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, challenged the validity of the Bible altogether and questioned the purpose of its application.[28] To that effort, Letty Russell recounts a 1981 gathering of members from the Society of Biblical Literature seeking to answer the questions, "What is it that we are doing as feminists when we interpret the Bible? Is there something distinctive about this interpretation? If so, what?"[29] They put forth four options on how to approach the biblical text:

> (1) Looking to texts about women to counteract famous texts "against" women, (2) rejecting the Bible as not authoritative and/or useful, (3) looking to the Bible generally for a liberation perspective, and (4) looking to texts about women to learn from the intersection of the stories of ancient and modern women living in patriarchal cultures.[30]

There was a continued desire not just to engage with the biblical text, but to give it increased purpose and parameters of study with the lens of feminism. This blossomed even more through the third wave of feminism with a broader understanding of what it means to be a feminist, how feminism impacts and is impacted by the larger global context, and how biblical interpretation has evolved accordingly. It is not just about reading the biblical text

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[27] *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*. edited by Susanne Scholz, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. xxvi.
[28] Shectman, Sarah. "Feminist Biblical Interpretation: History and Goals." *TheTorah.com*, 2019, www.thetorah.com/article/feminist-biblical-interpretation-history-and-goals. Scholars like Mary Daly rejected the Bible entirely, deeming it to have no social value.
[29] *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible.* edited by Letty M Russell, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1985. Pp. 14.
[30] Ibid., pp. 15.

with the feminist perspective exclusively, but as Suzanne Scholz's recent publication shows, feminist biblical scholarship now includes factors such as sexuality, globalization, media culture, neoliberalism, spirituality, and more.[31] While the evolution of feminism and feminist bible interpretation have laid the groundwork for the field, Scholz notes that there is a need for survey and assessment to understand where the field goes next.[32]

There have been many prolific and prominent writers on this topic including most of the scholars consulted and cited in this thesis. They have not only helped to frame the field in its early stages, but they also are working to elevate and integrate it into the larger field of feminism and bible study. Within this scholarship have been several attempts to synthesize and categorize the various approaches. Two such examples are from Esther Fuchs and Alice Ogden Bellis. Fuchs suggests that while there has been a wealth of publications, these commentaries still exist as largely separate entities.[33] By creating a map, she aims to bring these critical observations and analyses into conversation with one another.[34] Her three main categories are gynocentric, pluralistic, and feminist.[35] The gynocentric, or woman-centered, approach focuses on women's historical experiences, literary expressions, and female roles, while emphasizing passages that validate, celebrate, and reflect the power of women.[36] This approach is represented by Phyllis Trible, Carol Meyers, Ilana Pardes, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky.[37] The pluralistic approach, followed by Meike Bal, Phyllis Bird, and Athalya Brenner, is the most reconstructive, allowing the author to move between

[31] Scholz, see table of contents for the broad range of topics.
[32] Ibid., pp. Xxxi.
[33] Fuchs, Esther. "Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible." *The Hebrew Bible: New Insights and Scholarship*, edited by Frederick E. Greenspahn, New York, New York University Press, 2008. Pp. 76.
[34] Ibid., pp. 77.
[35] Fuchs, Esther. *Feminist Theory and the Bible: Interrogating the Sources.* United States, Lexington Books, 2016. Pp. 14-17.
[36] Ibid., pp. 14.
[37] Ibid., pp. 15.

methodologies depending on the context.[38] The final group, spearheaded by Fuchs herself, includes Cheryl Exum, Alice Bach, Claudia Camp, and Gale Yee.[39] The feminist approach recognizes the uncompromisingly androcentric, or male-centered, perspectives and priorities of biblical texts, as she writes, "This approach is critical, as it engaged a consistent interrogation of patriarchal premises and presuppositions, and as it questions the representation of women as stereotypic or utopian."[40] While the approach in this thesis likely falls into the gynocentric category, it does cite and engage with scholars from each of the categories, providing a broader understanding and diversity of voices from within the field of feminist biblical interpretation.

The overview from Bellis, while being more straightforward, is no less valuable in understanding the wide range of scholarship. Bellis proposes that the variety of angles used to approach feminist biblical interpretation exists on a continuum.[41] On one end, the biblical text is viewed as the product of its authors and editors, meaning interpreters would consider the historical and social context of the female characters' lives.[42] At the center, the text is a finished product for the reader to understand what it is saying regardless of what was intended.[43] On the other end of the continuum, the text is entirely open to the reader's understanding, a literary technique called reader-response criticism.[44] While Bellis does not go into further depth or assign her fellow scholars to a place on the continuum, her description illustrates the overarching approach not just to feminist bible study but to any immersion into biblical text or interpretation.

[38] Ibid., pp. 15.
[39] Ibid., pp. 17.
[40] Ibid., pp. 16.
[41] Bellis (2000), pp. 29.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid.

Feminist biblical interpretation is not just an academic field, it also has practical application in a variety of settings. In the Reform Movement, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* was inspired by a 1993 charge from Cantor Sarah Sager, who sought to reclaim the voices of women in Jewish sacred text, while making it accessible and relevant for all.[45] Unlike Stanton's commentary that only addresses female characters, the *Women's Commentary* covers the entirety of the Torah while sharply focusing on women and women's issues throughout the text. In addition to the primary commentary which is complemented by various perspectives and literary modes, exclusively written by women, the *Women's Commentary* also engages with the challenge of gender in Hebrew translation.[46] In a note from the editors, Rabbis Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea Weiss describe the framing purpose that grounds their endeavour: "In reproducing the variety of Torah interpretations, past and present, we envision our readers joining the centuries-old dialogue through their own personal and communal study."[47] On a personal note, after more than a decade of using the *Women's Commentary* as a primary and preferred resource, it was striking to me that these efforts did not extend past Deuteronomy. Whether that is because Reform communities do not engage as much with the rest of the Hebrew Bible or simply an acknowledgement of the massive undertaking required to produce a work of this kind, my interest in exploring women in the continuing historical narrative of the Early Prophets was, in part, inspired by the approach and impact of the *Women's Commentary.*

[45] *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss, New York, URJ Press, 2008.
[46] This is significant in that it sets the work apart from most of the other scholarship explored in this thesis. The only other translator is Robert Alter, who translates with a literary and historical perspective, not necessarily one of gender. It is also one of the main reasons this text becomes accessible and relevant for contemporary communities who utilize it.
[47] *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, pp. xl.

Regardless of preferred methodology, the purpose of feminist biblical reading is not to enter with the assumptions that all men oppressed women, that all women had no power, or that patriarchy was the only system of society or family. Rather, as Alice Bach states, there is a clear responsibility when approaching the text with a feminist lens, one that is adopted by this thesis:

> A responsible feminist reading is not one that dreams of matriarchy and imagines a world in which women are in control as a spiritual realm that enhances life. The key word is power, for any hierarchized power structure is going to award power to some and deny it to others. For me, a successful feminist interpreation of a biblical narrative text will not be biased in favor of women or put the blame for humanity's ills only at the feet of men.[48]

[48] *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Alice Bach, New York, Routledge, 1999, pp. xv.

## Theory of Power

Power is surprisingly hard to define because it is so complex and holds certain connotations depending on the historical or societal context. There are three layers of power that are being examined by this study: What is the general notion of power? What is the feminist theory of power? How are general and feminist power read into the biblical text?

While there are a multitude of ways to define power, for the purposes of this thesis, the concept of power can be distinguished between power-over versus power-to.[49] Power-over comes with an understanding that a system or relationship of hierarchy exists in which someone asserts power or influence over another. In more simplified terms, according to Robert Dahl, the idea of power is that "A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that they would not otherwise do."[50] While Dahl's theory is foundational to the overall definition of power, there were some who viewed it as single dimensional and in need of additional layers. The first set of theorists who built on Dahl were Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz. They added a "second-face" of power which argued that power exists in a complex system beyond individual interactions. Rather, it focuses on decision making with the large biases and agendas that guide and influence power.[51] Finally the "third-face" of power was added by Steven Lukes, who takes a broader view of control in the system to assert power in more widespread and ideological ways.[52] While the details of each dimension or face are important, more relevant to this study is the nature of this strand of power theory's evolution, particularly as it moved

[49] As described by Amy Allen (1998, 2018).
[50] Dahl, Robert. "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science*, 2:3, 1957, pp. 201–15. Pp. 202-203.
[51] Bachrach, Peter and Morton Baratz. "The Two Faces of Power," *American Political Science Review*, 56, 1962, pp. 941–952.
[52] Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View*. 1974. 2nd ed., London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Pp. 16.

from the individual to the system. This will be evident in feminist power theory as well as applicable as the biblical narrative and notions of power explored.

Power-over can be both formal, conferred by one's position, or informal, imposed by society or personality. Whereas power-over suggests that power is a limited resource or substance that one either has to leverage or not, power-to is about one's capacity or ability to act.[53] In the realm of power-to one has the ability to actualize their potential. One of the leading scholars on the theory of power and feminism, Amy Allen, loosely labels power-to as empowerment and power-over as domination, especially as it relates to power that is unjust or illegitimate.[54] Both of these are based on exercising power, actively using the power either over someone else or for oneself. Unsatisfied with the binary of power-over versus power-to, Allen writes:

> Feminists have yet to develop a satisfactory account of power. Existing feminist accounts of power tend to have a one-sided emphasis either on power as domination or on power as empowerment. This conceptual one-sidedness must be overcome if feminists are to develop an account complex enough to illuminate women's diverse experiences with power.[55]

Accordingly, Allen supports a third understanding of power that allows for solidarity and partnership, the notion of power-with.[56] Hannah Arendt also situates herself in this category, although unknowingly as she wrote prior to Allen. For Arendt, power, "corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert."[57] Another prominent

[53] Allen, Amy. "Rethinking Power." *Hypatia*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1998, pp. 21–40. Pp. 34.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., pp. 21, paper abstract.
[56]Ibid., pp. 35.
[57] Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. London, Allen Lane, 1970. Pp. 44.

philosopher on the topic of power is Michel Foucault. Foucault's understanding of power is relational which, as summarized by Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn, describes "the social relationships and structures by means of which people - whether individuals or groups - control and dominate, or inspire and sustain."[58] In this definition, power can be positive or productive as well as negative or repressive, stemming from any and all interactions. This further supports the practice of power-with towards collective action.

While there is not one kind of feminism, there is also not one school of thinking about feminist power. As the feminist movement evolved, particularly in the third wave, different ideological groups formed that focused on various aspects of feminism such as women in the public versus private sphere, systemic patriarchy and negativity towards male dominance, and acknowledging the different experiences of women based on sexuality, class, race, etc.[59] While feminists draw heavily from Foucault's teachings on power, some argued that it is almost too focused on the micro level. Sociologist Nickie Charles calls attention to this, while emphasizing both the micro and macro levels:

> This alerts us to the feminist insistence on the importance of the collective as well as indivdiual action in order to transform relation that systemically disempower women, and the danger of focusing too exclusively on resistance and accommodation at an individual level. Foucault and feminism come together in the idea that power exists not only at an institutional level but also within daily lives.[60]

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[58] Fewell, Danna Nolan, and David M. Gunn. *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story.* Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1997. Pp. 15.
[59] Charles, Nickie. "Feminist Practices: Identity, Difference, Power." *Practising Feminism: Identity, Difference, Power*, edited by Nickie Charles and Felicia Hughes-Freeland, London, Routledge, 1996, pp. 1–37. Pp. 2.
[60] Ibid., pp. 14-15.

In talking about power and gender, it is imperative that the question of patriarchal, male-dominated society be addressed. Gerda Lerner, one of the founders of women's history as an academic study, looked at the creation of the patriarchy from the Bible to modernity.[61] She suggests that patriarchy exists as a social and historical construct established in the time period of the biblical narrative and defined accordingly:

> The manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does *not* imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influence, and resources.[62]

Bible scholars across the feminist spectrum have attempted to tackle this question of patriarchy and how it can be either ignored, vaguely acknowledged, or fully incorporated into the feminist reading of the text. Ilana Pardes reviews these different approaches through the lens of the Creation story, the first moment between man and woman.[63] Pardes challenges the ideas on either extreme. On the one side, Esther Fuchs focuses solely on the patriarchal premise in the representation of the biblical female characters. On the other side, Phyllis Trible offers a notion of depatriarchalizing biblical reading, seeking unity between her respect for the biblical text and deep commitment to equality for women. In her introduction to the idea of depatriarchalizing, Trible herself writes of the conundrum when approaching the biblical text as such, especially in regards to God:

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[61] Lerner, Gerda. *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1986. This was a two-part series, the first focused on the biblical period and the second looking at the Middle Ages to 1870.
[62] Lerner, pp. 239.
[63] Pardes, Ilana. *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach.* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992.

> I face a terrible dilemma: Choose ye this day whom you will serve: the God of the fathers or the God of sisterhood. If the God of the fathers, then the Bible supplies models for your slavery. If the God of sisterhood, then you must reject patriarchal religion and go forth without models to claim your freedom.[64]

Pardes goes on to say that regardless of whether patriarchy is ideologically critiqued or not explicitly confronted, it is still being brought to the forefront of the conversation and challenged.[65]

A theme that emerges in feminist theory and scholarship is that feminism should not just assume powerlessness or oppression. Rather, by looking at the places where women do have power, much can be learned about how to broaden the scope of female power system-wide. This leads to a brief word about authority and leadership as they relate to power. Power and authority are not interchangeable nor mutually exclusive. Authority is the right to implement decisions, control a situation, or make binding declarations. Furthermore, authority is usually acquired and employed by virtue of one's role. One could have power with little or no authority, or authority with little or no power. A biblical example would be the slave drivers in Egypt at the beginning of the Book of Exodus. They have the power to terrorize and participate in the oppression of the slaves, however only Pharaoh has the power and authority to free them.

Thus, a subset of power is leadership. Not every person with power is a leader, but a leader must be someone who holds a certain amount of power, vision, and influence, whether for good or bad. Just as there are several frameworks and definitions of power, so too are

[64] Trible, Phyllis. "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 41, no. 1, 1973, pp. 30–48. Pp. 31.
[65] Pardes, pp. 37.

there a myriad of approaches not just to leadership but to feminist leadership. One contribution is Aarti Kapoor's broad definition of feminist leadership: "A style of leadership with characteristics commonly associated with social constructs of femininity, i.e. collaborative, relational, consensus-building, open, intuitive, and so on."[66] Similar to the premise of this study, because power, leadership, and authority are inherently linked, Kapoor goes on to establish that for her, authority is related to role, system, or task, and that power relates to the person.[67] Kapoor's definition suggests that when women lead, they do so with every part of their womanhood which should not be suppressed or disregarded. Rabbi Sarah Berman offers a biblical example of this feminist leadership model in her sermon on Miriam.[68] In the moment just after the exodus from Egypt, both Moses and Miriam sing songs of praise, and Berman examines the difference between their language choices:

> By singing *Shiru* ["all sing"] instead of *Ashira* ["let me sing"], Miriam invites all of Israel to join her in this experience of joy and thanksgiving. It is a recognition that leadership--and life--can't happen alone, but to be successful must be done in community--and must include the perspectives of both men and women.[69]

By approaching it in this way, Miriam writes herself and the whole of the Israelite community back into the narrative.

Ultimately, the fields of scholarship on feminist leadership and authority are vast and could be research topics on their own. For the purposes of this thesis the focus is power, steeped with the awareness that authority and leadership are also deeply interconnected.

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[66] Kapoor, Aarti. "What Is Feminist Leadership?" *Embode*, 27 Mar. 2017, www.embode.co/news/what-feminist-leadership. Kapoor is a lawyer and activist working in the field of international development and human rights.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Berman, Sarah. *Shiru: Miriam's Model for Reform Leadership*. HUC-JIR Senior Sermon, 2019.
[69] Ibid. The text is from Exodus 15.

Finally, not unlike real life, in biblical text the assumption is that it is rare to see a woman who has power, authority, or a leadership position. However, what this thesis aims to demonstrate are some of the ways women use their power, however limited, and how the text and context actually do provide examples of female leaders and authoritative moments for these women.

# PART II: CASE STUDIES

## Rahab (Joshua 2; 6:17-25)

From the very beginning of the conquest of the land of Israel, a woman is found at the center of the story.[70] Just after Moses' death, Joshua prepares to enter the land and lead the people in the next chapter of their story. Joshua sends two men to Jericho to spy, assessing the situation and reporting back. The spies end up at the house of Rahab, a prostitute. The king of Jericho hears of the spies' presence and suspects she is harboring them. Instead of turning them in, she hides them and boldly lies to the king's guard about their whereabouts. She intentionally sends the guards off in the wrong direction and after they leave, she confronts the spies.

Rahab says that she has heard of the power of their God and knows the land was promised to the Israelites:

*Joshua 2:9-11*[71]

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|---|---|
| (9) She said to the men, "I know that God has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all the inhabitants of the land are quaking before you. (10) For we have heard how God dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two Amorite kings across the Jordan, whom you doomed. (11)When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for Adonai your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below." | וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל־הָאֲנָשִׁים יָדַעְתִּי כִּי־נָתַן יְהוָה לָכֶם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְכִי־נָפְלָה אֵימַתְכֶם עָלֵינוּ וְכִי נָמֹגוּ כָּל־יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ מִפְּנֵיכֶם: כִּי שָׁמַעְנוּ אֵת אֲשֶׁר־הוֹבִישׁ יְהוָה אֶת־מֵי יַם־סוּף מִפְּנֵיכֶם בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם וַאֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂיתֶם לִשְׁנֵי מַלְכֵי הָאֱמֹרִי אֲשֶׁר בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן לְסִיחֹן וּלְעוֹג אֲשֶׁר הֶחֱרַמְתֶּם אוֹתָם: וַנִּשְׁמַע וַיִּמַּס לְבָבֵנוּ וְלֹא־קָמָה עוֹד רוּחַ בְּאִישׁ מִפְּנֵיכֶם כִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהִים בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת: |

[70] The following two paragraphs are a summary of Joshua 2, 6:17-25.
[71] Adapted JPS translation.

Rahab knows the power of the Israelite God and she knows they are about to descend on Jericho with force. She wants to negotiate safety for herself and her family in exchange for the kindness she has shown in protecting the spies. The spies agree, but only on the condition that she tell no one of their mission. Their instruction to her is to gather her family in the house and hang a crimson cord from the window. Rahab then helps the spies escape, giving them directions for how to safely return across the Jordan. The spies report back to Joshuawho is fortified by Rahab's declaration that this is indeed the land that God has promised the Israelites. Finally, when the Israelites invade, Rahab is spared from the destruction of Jericho. She and her family are brought out of the city and live among the Israelites from then on.

The story of Rahab is both simple and deeply nuanced and complex. On the one hand, Rahab is a woman who seeks to protect herself and those she loves. She acts quickly when presented with an opportunity and is able to strike a deal with the spies. She has deep clarity about the power of the Israelite God and an awareness of how to save herself and her family through an act of kindness. On the other hand, she is a marginalized and judged member of society. She is also one of the few named characters (of any gender) in the first half of the Book of Joshua and the first woman in the post-Deuteronomy account, both of which make her noteworthy in the bigger picture of the narrative.[72] Her story has many biblical parallels, making it the perfect bridge into the next phase of the story, from Moses to Joshua, from Torah to Prophets.[73]

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[72] Berlin, Adele, and Marc Zvi Brettler. *The Jewish Study Bible*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2014. pp. 443.

[73] Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2006. Pp. 210-213. Frymer-Kensky connects Rahab's story to different points in Torah. Two in particular are the original episode of the spies in Numbers 13 as it compares to the spies of Joshua 2; and the crimson cord hanging on the doorpost as an illusion to the blood of the pascal lamb of Exodus 12, keeping the Israelites safe from destruction.

A starting point to understanding Rahab more fully is to consider the meaning of her name and how she is referred to in the biblical text. Her name רָחָב (*Rahab*) means "wide" or "broad." As Tikva Frymer-Kensky writes, "She is the 'broad of Jericho' - the wide-open woman who is the wide-open door to Canaan."[74] She provides an entry point for Joshua and the Israelites to enter the land of Canaan, but moreover, as Frymer-Kensky and others suggest, the meaning of her name has a certain connotation linked to her being an אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה (*isha zona*), typically translated as prostitute, harlot, or whore.[75] A prostitute is one who accepts or even requires compensation for sexual acts.[76] As explained by feminist Bible scholar, Phyllis Bird, the overarching categorization of a prostitute is a downcast woman who exists in liminality.[77] She is in demand by men, and yet she has neither respect nor honor in society. "The harlot is that 'other' woman, tolerated but stigmatized, desired but ostracized."[78] According to Bird, by defining and linking Rahab to her profession as the first impression, "the reader does not expect anything from her, or at least not anything of moral strength, courage, or insight."[79] Thus, her actions prove to be surprising and while they are lauded by the ancient rabbis and modern commentators, being a prostitute will always be a part of her story.[80]

Some readers of this story have trouble reconciling Rahab's status as a savior or oracle of Israel with her role as a prostitute. Early translators of the text, including Josephus and Targum Jonathan, connected זוֹנָה (*zona*) to the root of מָזוֹן (*mazon*), meaning

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[74] Ibid., pp. 217.
[75] Joshua 2:1. While all terms have the same connotation more or less, there is not a decided translation. JPS translates אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה as harlot, Robert Alter as whore, Frymer-Kensky as prostitute. For the purposes of consistency, I will use the term prostitute.
[76] My own brief definition, although influenced by the more in depth explanation of Phyllis Bird.
[77] Bird, Phyllis. "The Harlot as Heroine: Narrative Art and Social Presupposition in Three Old Testament Texts." *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Alice Bach, New York, Routledge, 1999, pp. 99–117. Pp. 100.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., pp. 108.
[80] Rahab is called אִשָּׁה זוֹנָה in Joshua 2:1; and רָחָב הַזּוֹנָה in Joshua 6:17, 25.

"nourishment" or "food."[81] Thus, instead of referring to her as a prostitute, for them, it was contextually appropriate that Rahab would be a tavern or inn-keeper, providing the spies with food and a place to sleep. While that may remove the stain on her character for some, others hold fast to her identity as a prostitute, making her later midrashic conversion and acceptance of God all the more compelling and righteous.[82]

Her position as a prostitute may also be why the spies find themselves at her doorstep. Regardless of whether Rahab's residence is an inn or a brothel, most understand it as a place on the outskirts, a place where strangers, like the spies, would not stand out.[83] The Malbim, a 19th century commentator, suggests that the spies intentionally went to Rahab as a prostitute, not ncessarily for sex, but for the information she gained from her clientele:[84]

> Her name was known to all of the great men in the land. They would reveal the secrets of the land to her. If the spies stayed there they would be able to find out about all of the aspects going on around the land. Therefore, the spies did not go to any other place, they just 'slept there.'[85]

The Malbim's understanding of Rahab is that knowledge is power, something that the spies want to capitalize on. In a different reading of why the spies come to Rahab, modern scholar Yair Zakovitch suggests that it was not by coincidence at all, but rather that Rahab manipulates the entire scene so that the spies would be indebted to her.[86] If that is the case,

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[81] Roberston, Amy Cooper. "Rahab the Faithful Harlot." *TheTorah.com*, 2019, www.thetorah.com/article/rahab-the-faithful-harlot.
[82] Roberston, Amy Cooper. "Rahab and Her Interpreters." *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom et al., Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, pp. 109–112. Pp. 110. Rahab's conversion to Judaism is stated explicitly in BT Megillah 14b.
[83] Both Tikva Frymer-Kensy and Alice Ogden Bellis write about the spies not standing out at Rahab's.
[84] Malbim - Meir Leibush Ben Yehiel Michel, 1809–1879.
[85] Malbim on Joshua 2:1; Cooper Roberston, Amy. "Rahab the Faithful Harlot."
[86] Frymer-Kensky (2006), pp. 219. As cited in footnote 10. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to access the original source of Zakovitch.

Zakovitch illustrates Rahab as a shrewd and conniving woman. Therefore, the question between Malbim and Zakovitch is in what way did Rahab have power.

Rahab has a power-to moment, she is motivated by the safety of her family and is empowered by her quick thinking and response to the rapidly unfolding situation.[87] When the king of Jericho comes to her doorstep, it is in this moment that Rahab takes control. She wastes no time in hiding the spies and lying to the king's guard, actively deceiving them with misinformation. It is this act of חֶסֶד (*chesed*), of "kindness," that causes the spies to pledge loyalty to Rahab and her request for safety.[88] Hiding the spies and her declaration of faith in God's promise of the land is largely what the rabbis focus on in their assessment of Rahab.

As alluded to above, Zevachim 116b suggests that Rahab admits her sin of prostitution and converts after this episode with the spies:

> The Sages **said** with regard to Rahab: **She was ten years old when the Jewish people left Egypt, and she engaged in prostitution all forty years that the Jewish people were in the wilderness. After** that, when she was **fifty years** old, she **converted** when the two spies visited her. **She said: May** all of my sins of prostitution **be forgiven me as a reward** for having endangered myself with the **rope, window, and flax,** by means of which I saved Joshua's two spies.[89]

By establishing her as a long-time prostitute, which the rabbis read as a long-time sinner, her conversion and faith are to be celebrated and used as a model. It is never really explained in the biblical text why she helps the spies or why she chooses this moment to change her beliefs, but it is largely regarded as a moment of God. The rabbis do not stop

[87] Refers back to theory of power.
[88] Joshua 2:12,14.
[89] BT Zevachim 116b, translation by sefaria.org.

there, however. They also affirm her conversion, marry her to Joshua, and make their offspring a lineage of priests and prophets. This discussion is in the context of Huldah's status as a prophet, but it does a great deal to elevate the perception and understanding of Rahab:

> **Eight prophets, who were** also **priests, descended from Rahab the prostitute, and they are: Neriah;** his son **Baruch; Seraiah; Mahseiah; Jeremiah;** his father, **Hilkiah;** Jeremiah's cousin **Hanamel; and** Hanamel's father, **Shallum. Rabbi Yehuda said: So too, Huldah the prophetess was a descendant of Rahab the prostitute…For** Rahab **converted and married Joshua,** and therefore Huldah descended from both Joshua and Rahab.[90]

There are two possible purposes for the tone of these talmudic teachings. The first is to offer a lesson to any convert, that in seeking forgiveness and doing acts of kindness, the true path can be attained. The second has more to do with the rabbis than Rahab. She has redeeming qualities and a place in history, but her background, her boldness, and likely her gender cause the rabbis discomfort. Converting her and marrying her to Joshua attempts to domesticate Rahab, as Judith Baskin writes, "This formerly notorious prostitute, who epitomized all the dangers of the gentile temptress, was rendered benign when she adopted the non-threatening guise of a compliant Jewish wife and mother."[91] Even with the sanitization of Rahab's character, the rabbis are still not without judgment. In Megillah 15a, Rahab is discussed in relation to her beauty and the lust of men for her:

> **The Sages taught: There were four women of extraordinary beauty in the world:**

[90] BT Megillah 14b, translation by sefaria.org.
[91] Baskin, Judith R. *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature*. University Press of New England, 2002. Pp. 159-160.

> **Sarah, and Abigail, Rahab, and Esther… Rahab aroused impure thoughts by her name,** i.e., the mere mention of her name would inspire lust for her...Similarly, **Rabbi Yitzḥak said: Anyone who says Rahab, Rahab, immediately experiences a seminal emission** due to the arousal of desire caused by Rahab's great beauty.[92]

Even though the rabbis positively reframe Rahab's story in different teachings, categorizing her by beauty, lust, and sex lowers the status Rahab might have had in the cannon of Jewish text and memory. The rabbis hold Rahab in high regard as a convert and savior of Israel but only held in balance with her female reality. This is summarized so aptly by Baskin:

> For them [the rabbis], Rahab became a pre-eminent model of the righteous proselyte, one who went beyond all others in her recognition of God's great powers. Moreover, by imagining her as a repentant fallen woman who found the true God and emerged as a mother in Israel, the rabbis transformed Rahab into an exemplar of the efficacy of Judaism and its traditions in taming the disordering powers of female sexuality.[93]

Rahab operates within the confines of her society. If the midrash has truth to it, Rahab has been a prostitute for decades, making her both an "expert" in her field and also doomed to stay in that life forever. While she does not have a husband or children that are explicitly mentioned in the text, she does take responsibility for her parents and siblings, at least in the negotiation of their safety with the spies.[94] Rahab's power, therefore, comes from within,

[92] BT Megillah 15a, translation by sefaria.org.
[93] Baskin, pp. 155.
[94] Joshua 2:13, Rahab lists those that she wants the spies to protect. In following verses, the spies change her words and ultimately boil it down to those in her "father's house" (Joshua 6:25).

from her ability to see the changes that are about to happen and to know that it is within her grasp to protect herself and her family. Furthermore, her words to the spies have immense power for Joshua and the Israelites, serving as an omen of victory and a charge forward towards the land. Despite the narrator's initial depiction of Rahab as a fallen woman, she is ultimately read and revered as a strong female character in the story of Israel.

## Deborah (Judges 4-5)

Deborah is perhaps the most well known of the women studied in this thesis, largely because the context and impact of her story are so striking. Many commentators and scholars have examined these chapters and verses, seeking to understand the dynamics of gender, power, poetry, and prophecy. Additionally, the story and Song of Deborah are an assigned haftarah reading for *Parshat Beshalach*, to complement Exodus' Song of the Sea.[95]

As prophetess and judge, Deborah is a leader of the Israelite community.[96] She sits under a palm tree and people come from far and wide seeking her advice and judgment. However, the land is reigned in terror by King Jabin and his army commander, Sisera. Deborah charges Barak, invoking the word of Adonai, the God of Israel, to muster troops to attack Sisera's massive army. Barak waivers, insisting he will not go without Deborah. Deborah agrees, but says that glory shall not be his; rather, God will deliver Sisera to the hands of a woman. They gather the troops, launch their attack on Sisera's army and miraculously defeat them. However, Sisera manages to flee the battle, only to happen upon the tent of Yael.[97] Yael greets him with hospitality and kindness, but as soon as he falls asleep, she ruthlessly kills him.

The narrative prose of Chapter 4 is immediately followed by a poetic retelling in Chapter 5. Referred to as the Song of Deborah, this poem of victory lifts up Deborah, Barak and Yael, all signified in song and praise to God. It is rich with imagery, metaphor and poetic structure. In addition to an opening and closing verse, Yairah Amit breaks down the three distinct sections of the song:

[95] "Parashat Beshalach." *Hebcal.com*, www.hebcal.com/sedrot/beshalach. In Ashkenazi tradition, both prose and poem are read (Judges 4-5), however in Sephardic communities, only Chapter 5, the poem, is read.
[96] The following is a summary of Judges 4:4-5:31.
[97] The name יָעֵל (*Yael)*, is often transliterated as Jael, which is reflected in various quotations. I am choosing to keep her name closer to the Hebrew and will refer to her as Yael unless using another's text.

> The first (vv. 4-11c) depicts God's appearance or theophany, the difficult situation of His people and its hope for salvation; the second (vv. 11d-23) portrays the Israelite warriors in contrast with the Canaanite kings; the third (vv. 24-30) focuses upon the non-Israelite Jael who represents victory, contrasted with Sisera's mother, who represents defeat.[98]

The song celebrates Deborah as a mother of Israel, Yael as a most blessed woman, and Barak as a champion.[99] With the song of victory complete, the land and people are quiet and at peace for 40 years, a lasting legacy of Deborah's leadership.

The analysis below is focused on the prose narrative, offering a close reading of the primary verses where Deborah is introduced and where her authority and leadership are established:

*Judges 4:4-5*

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|---|---|
| (4) Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time.[100]<br><br>Deborah, a prophet-woman, wife of Lappidoth, she it was who judged Israel at that time.[101]<br><br>Deborah the prophetess-woman, Lapidot-woman - she judged Israel at that time.[102] | וּדְבוֹרָה אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת<br>הִיא שֹׁפְטָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּעֵת הַהִיא׃ |

[98] *The Jewish Study Bible*, pp. 506.
[99] Verses referenced in order - Judges 5:7; 5:24; 5:12.
[100] JPS translation from sefaria.org.
[101] Alter, Robert. *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings: A Translation with Commentary*. 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2013. Pp. 94.
[102] Frymer-Kensky, Tikva. *Reading the Women of the Bible.* New York, Schocken Books, 2002. Pp. 45.

| | |
|---|---|
| (5) She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for judgement.[103] | וְהִיא יוֹשֶׁבֶת תַּחַת־תֹּמֶר דְּבוֹרָה בֵּין הָרָמָה וּבֵין בֵּית־אֵל בְּהַר אֶפְרָיִם וַיַּעֲלוּ אֵלֶיהָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַמִּשְׁפָּט: |

These three different translations demonstrate two important points. The first harkens back to the quote from Alice Ogden Bellis in the introduction of this thesis that reminds the reader that every translation is a form of interpretation, influenced and guided by the translator's lens and experience. The second is that each word of the text is a piece of information that provides answers and questions all at the same time. For example, why was each word chosen and composed in the way it was? What does the word's conjugation (tense, person, and gender) signify?[104] How does it inform the narrative?

The first phrase to note is אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה (*ishah neviah*), to signify that she is a "female prophet." While this might seem fairly inconsequential, it is slightly different than language used for the other women who claim the title of prophet. Miriam and Huldah are simply described with the feminine form of the term for prophet, הַנְּבִיאָה (*ha-neviah*), not emphasizing their gender by using the additional word for "woman," אִשָּׁה (*ishah)*.[105] Robert Alter suggests that, "The introduction of the 'woman' component, which is not strictly required by idiomatic usage, highlights the prominence of woman vis-à-vis man that is evident in both Deborah's relation to Barak and in the story of Jael and Sisera."[106] There is not much else said about this phrase by the commentators, but it is a strong reminder that

[103] Adapted JPS translation, sefaria.org.
[104] Hebrew is a gendered language, meaning that words, even if they are neutral, must be in either masculine or feminine conjugation.
[105] Miriam (Exodus 15:20); Huldah (II Kings 22:14).
[106] Alter, pp. 94.

how Deborah leads and how she prophesies, will be framed or grounded in her experience as a woman.

The next phrase, אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת (*eshet lapiddot*) has inspired much debate. The default or standard definition labels Deborah as the "wife of Lappidoth."[107] Her role as a wife, and later as a mother, establishes Deborah as a mature, married woman.[108] Frymer-Kensky notes, however, that Lappidoth is a strange name for a man and is lacking the formula of his heritage (i.e. son of).[109] The rabbis suggest that as לַפִּיד (*lapid*) means "torch," being a אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת means that Deborah prepares wicks for the torches of the holy sanctuary as part of her leadership.[110] A third reading of אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת is that Deborah herself is the torch, a fiery and fierce woman, a charismatic and impassioned leader.[111] While this is the prefered understanding for many feminist scholars, other commentators agree as well. Rabbi David Altschuler, author of the *Metzudat David*, described Deborah as, "A woman of valor, zealous in her deeds as a torch afire."[112] Mieke Bal has written much about the gender and political dynamics of these two chapters in the Book of Judges. Her feminist reading suggests that there is little room for error when it comes to translating אֵשֶׁת לַפִּידוֹת:

> This insistence [of calling Deborah the wife of Lappidoth] is even more revealing when we realize that being "of torches" is the essence of Deborah: an inflamed and inflaming woman whose prophecy is crucial for the story. Her status as wife of an

[107] As can be seen by the JPS and Alter translations.
[108] Klein, Lillian R. "A Spectrum of Female Characters." *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, edited by Athalya Brenner, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, pp. 24–33. Pp. 27.
[109] Frymer-Kensky (2002), pp. 46. This is especially true in contrast to how the Prophetess Huldah is introduced as the wife of Shallum, son of Tikvah, son of Harhas (II Kings 22:14).
[110] Megillah 14a.
[111] Kalmanofsky, Amy. *Gender-Play in the Hebrew Bible: The Ways the Bible Challenges Its Gender Norms*. New York, Routledge, 2017. Pp. 50.
[112] Rabbi David Altschuler of Prague (1687-1769), commenting on Judges 4:4, translation from sefaria.org.

> unknown and obscure husband is clearly irrelevant, and hence, would not be mentioned. Again, it is a conflict between her narrative position and the role traditionally assigned to her that helps us understand the politics of gender underlying both the story and its reception.[113]

Bal, along with Frymer-Kensky, acknowledges that while being married might have been what the societal norms of the day required for Deborah to have the authority she did, it complicates our modern understanding of it.[114] Some of the rabbis were insistent, however, that Deborah be a married woman. Similar to their treatment of Rahab, linking her in marriage to Joshua after her conversion, Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, a 10th century midrashic collection, suggests that Barak and Lappidoth are one and the same, making Barak Deborah's husband.[115] They make the connection between Barak's name and the ominous *lappidoth*, that torch and lightning are both derived from a fire or sparks. As discussed throughout this thesis, the rabbis struggled with the existence and power of a woman who operated outside the confines of their gendered, societal roles. In reality, women have the power to be great leaders regardless of their marital or family status, and by trying to assign Deborah a husband, it suggests that she would not have been able to be prophet or judge otherwise.

Finally, the third phrase of verse 4 leading into verse 5 concerns Deborah being a judge of Israel. Deborah being a judge is established by an active verb rather than a title or noun, הִיא שָׁפְטָה (*he shofta*), "She judged." The judges, or chieftains, were Israel's leaders

[113] Bal, Mieke. *Death & Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges.* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988. Pp. 209.
[114] Frymer-Kensky (2002), pp. 46.
[115] Kadari, Tamar. "Deborah 2: Midrash and Aggadah." *Jewish Women's Archive*, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/deborah-2-midrash-and-aggadah.

before the monarchy, in many cases serving in military, political and judicial roles.[116] Deborah was the only female judge and the only judge to be a prophet. The text never indicates how Deborah came into this role of judge or into her prophecy for that matter. However, it sets her apart from both the other judges and the other women in the biblical narrative to this point. As Frymer-Kensky writes:

> They [other savior women] were private women; she [Deborah] was a recognized public figure. They lived ordinary lives until the politico-military world intruded into their realm; Deborah was active in the public arena as part of normal everyday life.[117]

Deborah held court publicly in the countryside, making her accessible for the people to come seek her judgment. Deborah imposed order where there was chaos, leaving a lasting legacy of peace. However, as Esther Fuchs notes, unlike the other judges, she is unable to claim victory against Sisera by herself; rather, she is assisted by Barak and Yael.[118]

The relationship between Deborah and Barak is brief, but complex. As with many of the figures analyzed in this thesis, Barak's name informs the narrative and commentaries. His name, בָּרָק (*barak*) means "lightning," which complements Deborah's fiery torch imagery. Barak serves as a sort of protégé, waiting for Deborah's prophetic call and strategic counsel. In fact, "he does not strike unless ignited by Deborah's power."[119] The dynamics between them are seen in the next several verses:

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[116] Alter, pp. 77.
[117] Frymer-Kensky (2002), pp. 45. Other "savior women" refer to Rahab, Rivka, and the women of Exodus.
[118] Fuchs, Esther. "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative." *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Alice Bach, New York, Routledge, 1999, pp. 77–84. Pp. 83.
[119] Skidmore-Hess, Daniel, and Cathy Skidmore-Hess. "Dousing the Fiery Woman: The Diminishing of the Prophetess Deborah." *Shofar*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–17. pp. 3.

*Judges 4:6-9*[120]

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| (6) She summoned Barak son of Abinoam, of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him:<br>"Adonai, the God of Israel, has commanded: Go, march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun. | וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּקְרָא לְבָרָק בֶּן־אֲבִינֹעַם מִקֶּדֶשׁ נַפְתָּלִי וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו הֲלֹא צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵךְ וּמָשַׁכְתָּ בְּהַר תָּבוֹר וְלָקַחְתָּ עִמְּךָ עֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפִים אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי נַפְתָּלִי וּמִבְּנֵי זְבֻלוּן: |
| (7) And I will draw Sisera, Jabin's army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hands." | וּמָשַׁכְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ אֶל־נַחַל קִישׁוֹן אֶת־סִיסְרָא שַׂר־צְבָא יָבִין וְאֶת־רִכְבּוֹ וְאֶת־הֲמוֹנוֹ וּנְתַתִּיהוּ בְּיָדֶךָ: |
| (8) But Barak said to her, "If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go." | וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ בָּרָק אִם־תֵּלְכִי עִמִּי וְהָלָכְתִּי וְאִם־לֹא תֵלְכִי עִמִּי לֹא אֵלֵךְ: |
| (9) And she said, "Indeed I will go with you, however, there will be no glory for you in the path you are taking, for God will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." So Deborah rose and went with Barak to Kedesh. | וַתֹּאמֶר הָלֹךְ אֵלֵךְ עִמָּךְ אֶפֶס כִּי לֹא תִהְיֶה תִּפְאַרְתְּךָ עַל־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ כִּי בְיַד־אִשָּׁה יִמְכֹּר יְהוָה אֶת־סִיסְרָא וַתָּקָם דְּבוֹרָה וַתֵּלֶךְ עִם־בָּרָק קֶדְשָׁה: |

This exchange between Deborah and Barak highlights several important features of the narrative. In verse 6, Deborah's connection to God, her legitimacy as a prophet, is revealed. While the JPS translation suggests that Deborah is commanding Barak on behalf of God, other translations shift the tone to more of a question which acknowledges the word הֲלֹא (*ha-lo*), with the interrogative *hey*, making the verse read as, "Has not Adonai, the God of Israel, charged you?" Alter's reasoning is that, as a prophet, Deborah already knows the

[120] Adapted JPS translation.

strategic plan and what God commands.[121] Frymer-Kensky strengthens this argument suggesting that God has previously charged Barak to gather troops to attack Sisera but that his reticence required him to seek confirmation from Deborah.[122] While many read Barak's hesitation and his dependency on Deborah as emasculating, it is worth recognizing that going to war is no small feat, especially when it stated that Sisera's army is 900 chariots strong and has been oppressing Israel for more than 20 years.[123]

Gender plays a significant role throughout this narrative but especially in this moment between Barak and Deborah. When Deborah says that Sisera will be delivered by the hand of a woman, the assumption is that she is that woman. Knowing how the rest of the story goes, Yael is in fact the victor over Sisera. However, Amy Kalmanofsky contends that Deborah herself did assume that she would be the savior and that she knew how to use her power as a woman, not necessarily as a prophet, to weaken Barak.[124] Gale Yee frames this as "Shame Syndrome," where a warrior woman uses her power and position to shame the weaker male:[125]

> Rather than a story about female military power, Judges 4 becomes a reflection on what it means "to be or not to be a man." Maleness is equated with honor. To be dishonored is to be "unmanned." Instead of celebrating women's military leadership, the story places women as adversaries of men. They become the means by which the men are "unmanned" or shamed.[126]

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[121] Alter, pp. 95.
[122] Frymer-Kensky (2002), pp. 48.
[123] Judges 4:3.
[124] Kalmanofsky, pp. 53.
[125] Yee, Gale A. "By the Hand of a Woman: The Metaphor of the Woman Warrior in Judges 4." *Semeia*, 1993, pp. 99-132. Pp. 115.
[126] Ibid.

The rabbis of the Talmud to some extent see Deborah as an adversary of men. They take issue with what they perceive to be arrogant behavior on her part towards Barak. In Pesachim 66b, the rabbis point to a verse from the song in Judges 5:

> **Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Anyone who acts haughtily, if he is a** Torah **scholar, his wisdom departs from him;** and **if he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him.** The Gemara explains: That **if he is a** Torah **scholar, his wisdom departs from him** is learned **from Hillel, for the Master said** in this *baraita*: Hillel **began to rebuke them with words.** Because he acted haughtily, he ended up **saying to them: I** once **heard this *halakha*, but I have forgotten** it, as he was punished for his haughtiness by forgetting the law. That **if he is a prophet his prophecy departs from him** is learned **from Deborah, as it is written: "The villagers ceased, they ceased in Israel, until I, Deborah, arose, I arose a mother in Israel"** (Judges 5:7). For these words of self-glorification, Deborah was punished with a loss of her prophetic spirit, **as it is written** later that it was necessary to say to her: **"Awake, awake, Deborah; awake, awake, utter a song"** (Judges 5:12), because her prophecy had left her.[127]

Similar to several women of this thesis, Deborah is also mentioned in Tractate Megillah in the discussion of seven female prophets. She and Huldah are singled out by Rav Nachman, again for "haughtiness:"

> **Rav Naḥman said: Haughtiness is not befitting a woman.** And a proof to this is that **there were two haughty women, whose names were** identical to the names of **loathsome** creatures. **One,** Deborah, **was called a hornet,** as her Hebrew name,

[127] BT Pesachim 66b, translation from sefaria.org.

Devorah, means hornet; **and one,** Huldah, **was called a weasel,** as her name is the Hebrew term for that creature. From where is it known that they were haughty? **With regard to** Deborah, **the hornet, it is written: "And she sent and called Barak"** (Judges 4:6), **but she herself did not go to him.**[128]

Contrary to Rav Nachman's rationale, it would make sense for Barak to go to Deborah, because although he was a high ranking official, Deborah was the leader, the judge and the prophet.[129] The rabbis, however, take issue with Deborah summoning Barak in this way, likely because of the gender expectations of a woman being subservient to a man. In modern Hebrew, דְּבוֹרָה (*devorah*) means "bee." Queen bees are responsible for the welfare and prosperity of the hive, and, in turn, are fiercely protected by their colony. As Cheryl Exum summarizes, "A mother in Israel is one who brings liberation from oppression, provides protection, and ensures the well-being and security of her people."[130] While the rabbis saw Deborah as a threat, perhaps she was acting in the best interest of her people all along.

Not all the traditional male commentators have scathing or at least mixed reviews of Deborah. "Indeed, Gersonides and Abravanel, both known for their misogynistic views in other contexts, surprise by their sincere admiration of Deborah as prophet and as leader."[131] These medieval commentators are inspired by Deborah, Don Issac Abarbanel in particular rejecting the unflattering remarks of the rabbinic sages.[132]

[128] BT Megillah 14b, translation from sefaria.org.
[129] The assumption is that if he was that close to Deborah and was charged with leading the army, he clearly had some role of importance.
[130] Exum, J. Cheryl. "'Mother in Israel': A Familiar Figure Reconsidered." *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Letty M Russell, London, Westminster Press, 1985, pp. 73–85. Pp. 85
[131] Schwartzmann, Julie. "The Attitude of Medieval Jewish Philosophers to the Phenomenon of Female Prophecy." *Shofar*, vol. 35, no. 3, Spring 2017, pp. 57–72. Pp. 67.
[132] Ibid., pp. 65.

While not exclusively, much of the more contemporary scholarship on Deborah has been written by women. During the 19th century, women engaged in the suffrage and women's rights movement were especially fascinated by Deborah as a character and role model. As one of the commentators in Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Women's Bible*, Clara Neyman, offers this insight to the importance of Deborah:

> Deborah was, perhaps, only one of many women who held such high and honorable positions. Unlike any modern ruler, Deborah dispensed justice directly, proclaimed war, led her men to victory, and glorified the deed of her army in immortal song. This is the most glorious tribute to a woman's genius and power. If Deborah, way back in ancient Judaism, was considered wise enough to advise her people in time of need and distress, why is it that at the end of the nineteenth century, woman has to contend for equal rights and fight to regain every inch of ground she has lost since then?[133]

As an aside, while Stanton shares Neyman's admiration of Deborah, she does not hesitate to offer her sharp critique of Yael. She calls Yael's extreme action of piercing Sisera's temple with a tent peg, "More like the work of a fiend than a woman."[134] Just as she does with her commentary on Athaliah, Stanton has little patience or appreciation for female characters who shed bad light or bring ill repute on women as a whole.

Neyman's call to action inspired by and grounded in Deborah's narrative rings true in the 21st century just as much as it did in the 19th century. As Fuchs concludes, "The story of Deborah does offer a positive portrait of a heroine as a national public figure, independent of traditional patriarchal roles."[135] Deborah's power is both power-over and power-to, in ways

[133] Stanton, Commentary on Judges, pp. 22.
[134] Ibid., pp. 20.
[135] Fuchs (1999), pp. 83.

that are hard to come by and hard to balance. She is granted a position of leadership and authority, doubly so as prophet and judge. People come to her and she speaks with divine truth. The combination of Deborah's integrative leadership and her poetic prophecy makes her function and presence extremely powerful.[136]

[136] Bal, pp. 209.

## Abigail (I Samuel 25)

King David is a central character in the Book of Samuel, and he establishes the line of kingship that continues through the Book of Kings and beyond, a long lasting legacy. While David may be the pivotal figure in this historical narrative, his story is shaped and punctuated by various women who come in and out of his life. Specifically David has many wives, a sign of his status and success. Three of his wives particularly frame the narrative. It begins with Michal, Saul's daughter, who loves David and is used as a pawn in a political alliance.[137] In his time as an outlaw, on the run from Saul, David meets Abigail, wife to another man, but so persuasive in her beauty and intelligence.[138] Later in his life as king, Bathsheba captures David's attention, becoming not only the mother of his ultimate heir, Solomon, but also revealing David to be greedy and weak.[139]

Although Michal and Bathsheba have more drawn out interactions with David, it is Abigail who is the focus of this chapter. While she is considered to be an underdeveloped character in the biblical narrative,[140] even from her short display, her cunning nature and the way she uses her words allow her to assert influence and power over the men in her life.

In brief, Abigail is the wife of Nabal of Carmel, and she is described as intelligent and beautiful. Her husband, on the other hand, a wealthy rancher, is unkind and stubborn. David, not yet king, sends messengers to Nabal asking for gifts in gratitude for treating his shepherds well. Nabal refuses and David proceeds with his army towards Nabal's land. A servant runs to Abigail to tell of the encounter and of David's advance. She acts quickly,

[137] I Samuel 18:20-30; Michal's expression of love for David and their marriage.
[138] I Samuel 25.
[139] II Samuel 11-12.
[140] Meyers, Carol, et al., editors. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000. Pp. 43.

gathering food and gifts and going out to meet David, unbeknownst to Nabal. She offers the gifts and lavish praise to David, all while bowing low and treating him like the king he will eventually become. Her gentleness and intellect persuade David to restrain his rage against Nabal and retreat. The interaction between the two is brief and has a strong impression on both Abigail and David. When Nabal finds out what Abigail has done in his stead, his courage and heart crumble, and he dies.[141] David returns and claims Abigail as his wife. She bears him a son and lives the rest of her life among David's household.

In interpreting Abigail and Nabal, much can be learned by a close reading of their characterizations and their names:

*I Samuel 25:2-3*

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| (2) There was a man in Maon whose possessions were in Carmel. The man was very wealthy; he owned three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. At the time, he was shearing his sheep in Carmel.<br>(3) The man's name was Nabal, and his wife's name was Abigail. The woman was intelligent and beautiful, but the man, a Calebite, was a hard man and an evildoer. | אִישׁ בְּמָעוֹן וּמַעֲשֵׂהוּ בַכַּרְמֶל וְהָאִישׁ גָּדוֹל מְאֹד וְלוֹ צֹאן שְׁלֹשֶׁת־אֲלָפִים וְאֶלֶף עִזִּים וַיְהִי בִּגְזֹז אֶת־צֹאנוֹ בַּכַּרְמֶל:<br>וְשֵׁם הָאִישׁ נָבָל וְשֵׁם אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲבִגָיִל וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת־שֶׂכֶל וִיפַת תֹּאַר וְהָאִישׁ קָשֶׁה וְרַע מַעֲלָלִים וְהוּא כָלְבִי: |

The Malbim, 19th century commentator, writes, "Nabal was famously bad, on account of his name meaning villian, and Abigail was known for being praiseworthy...she was complete, both in mental virtues and good intellect, and in virtue of body and beauty."[142]

[141] Levenson, Jon D. "I Samuel 25 as Literature and as History." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1978, pp. 11–28. Pp. 17. In a strong critique of Nabel, Levenson writes, "The description of Nabal's death is an exquisite portrait of a villain's inability to stand the light of justice." On I Samuel 25:37, the Malbim says that fear of David fell over Nabal and his blood cooled; Rashi and Radak both comment that Nabal's death was a result of his shock at how much his wife gifted David.

[142] Malbim on I Samuel 25:3.

In regards to Nabal's name, the word נָבָל (*Nabal*), typically translates as "boor," "foolish," or even "evil," "villain." An example of this outside of this narrative, can be found in the Book of Isaiah:

*Isaiah 32:6*

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| For the villain speaks villainy And plots treachery; To act impiously And to preach disloyalty against God; To leave the hungry unsatisfied And deprive the thirsty of drink. | כִּי נָבָל נְבָלָה יְדַבֵּר וְלִבּוֹ יַעֲשֶׂה־אָוֶן לַעֲשׂוֹת חֹנֶף וּלְדַבֵּר אֶל־יְהוָה תּוֹעָה לְהָרִיק נֶפֶשׁ רָעֵב וּמַשְׁקֵה צָמֵא יַחְסִיר: |

The irony and direct correlation from Isaiah to I Samuel is that Nabal refused to feed David and his men, leaving them hungry and unsatisfied. They requested an open offering of generosity from Nabal and through his rejection, his portrayal is solidified as stubborn, hard, evil, and boorish.

Abigail, on the other hand, is portrayed positively from the outset. The combination of beauty and intellect serves her well in the way she is able to influence Nabal and David. According to Jon Levenson, the description of Abigail as intelligent and beautiful links her to David, who was also thus described in his introduction to Saul:[143]

*I Samuel 16:18*

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| One of the attendants spoke up, "I have observed a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilled in music; he is a stalwart fellow and a warrior, sensible in speech, and handsome in appearance, and God is with him." | וַיַּעַן אֶחָד מֵהַנְּעָרִים וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה רָאִיתִי בֵּן לְיִשַׁי בֵּית הַלַּחְמִי יֹדֵעַ נַגֵּן וְגִבּוֹר חַיִל וְאִישׁ מִלְחָמָה וּנְבוֹן דָּבָר וְאִישׁ תֹּאַר וַיהוָה עִמּוֹ: |

[143] Levenson, pp. 18.

While Abigail's beauty is certainly a focus of the rabbis in later commentary, it is her verbal interaction with David that has been lauded by many scholars as a powerful mastery of speech. Alter writes, "Her shrewd intelligence will be vividly demonstrated in her brilliant speech to David."[144] Frymer-Kensky adds, "Her speech is a masterpiece of biblical rhetoric. In very few words, Abigail rescues her household from David, prevents David from committing a sin, and ensures her own future."[145] It is in her words that her power is most evident. The following analysis offers a bit of insight into the nuances of her speech.

*I Samuel 25:23-27 - Abigail's plea to David*

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| (23) When Abigail saw David, she quickly dismounted from the donkey and threw herself face down before David, bowing to the ground.<br>(24) Prostrate at his feet, she pleaded, "Let the blame be mine, my lord, but let your maid speak in your ears; hear the words of your maid.<br>(25) Please, my lord, pay no attention to that wretched fellow Nabal. For he is just what his name says: His name means 'boor' and he is a boor. And I, your maid did not see the young men whom my lord sent.<br>(26) And now, my lord, as God lives and as you live—the God who has kept you from seeking redress by blood with your own hands—let your enemies and all who would harm my lord fare like Nabal!<br>(27) Here is the present which your maidservant has brought to my lord; let it be given to the young men who follow in the footsteps of my lord. | וַתֵּרֶא אֲבִיגַיִל אֶת־דָּוִד וַתְּמַהֵר וַתֵּרֶד מֵעַל הַחֲמוֹר וַתִּפֹּל לְאַפֵּי דָוִד עַל־פָּנֶיהָ וַתִּשְׁתַּחוּ אָרְצָה: וַתִּפֹּל עַל־רַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר בִּי־אֲנִי אֲדֹנִי הָעָוֹן וּתְדַבֶּר־נָא אֲמָתְךָ בְּאָזְנֶיךָ וּשְׁמַע אֶת דִּבְרֵי אֲמָתֶךָ: אַל־נָא יָשֵׂם אֲדֹנִי אֶת־לִבּוֹ אֶל־אִישׁ הַבְּלִיַּעַל הַזֶּה עַל־נָבָל כִּי כִשְׁמוֹ כֵּן־הוּא נָבָל שְׁמוֹ וְנִבְלָה עִמּוֹ וַאֲנִי אֲמָתְךָ לֹא רָאִיתִי אֶת־נַעֲרֵי אֲדֹנִי אֲשֶׁר שָׁלָחְתָּ: וְעַתָּה אֲדֹנִי חַי־יְהוָה וְחֵי־נַפְשְׁךָ אֲשֶׁר מְנָעֲךָ יְהוָה מִבּוֹא בְדָמִים וְהוֹשֵׁעַ יָדְךָ לָךְ וְעַתָּה יִהְיוּ כְנָבָל אֹיְבֶיךָ וְהַמְבַקְשִׁים אֶל־אֲדֹנִי רָעָה: וְעַתָּה הַבְּרָכָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר־הֵבִיא שִׁפְחָתְךָ לַאדֹנִי וְנִתְּנָה לַנְּעָרִים הַמִּתְהַלְּכִים בְּרַגְלֵי אֲדֹנִי: |

[144] Alter, pp. 279. As commentary on I Samuel 25:3, Alter is foreshadowing her use of words in regards to her being described as intelligent.
[145] Frymer-Kensky (2002), pp. 319.

Abigail, a wealthy woman in her marriage to Nabal, throws herself on the ground and uses her words and body language to elevate David and diminish herself. This is not a reflection of how she sees herself, but rather a manipulation of David. He is coming in armed, on a mission and unlikely to stop for a woman, even one as beautiful as Abigail. By lowering herself to the ground, she is not only a physical barrier for David's advance, but establishes a perceived hierarchy by bowing down to him. Throughout the dialogue, she refers to David as a master or lord, and to herself as a maid.[146]

She ingratiates herself to him by taking the blame, all the while creating distance between herself and Nabal. She never refers to Nabal as her husband, rather she insults him and directly says she had nothing to do with turning David's servants away. In verse 27, Abigail presents the gifts she brought, but in the Hebrew the word used is בִּרְכָה (*bracha*), "blessing." This is a subtle nod to the fact that she is giving David tangible gifts of food and drink, but the greater gift is in the words of blessing she is about to deliver.

*I Samuel 25:28-31 - Abigail's prophetic assurance of David's reign*

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| (28) Please forgive the offense of your servant, for God will surely grant my lord an enduring house, for my lord is fighting the battles of God, and no evil will ever be found in you all your days.<br>(29) And if anyone sets out to pursue you and seek your life, the life of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life, in the care of God your God; and the lives of your enemies God will sling them from the hollow of the sling. | שָׂא נָא לְפֶשַׁע אֲמָתֶךָ כִּי עָשֹׂה־יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לַאדֹנִי בַּיִת נֶאֱמָן כִּי־מִלְחֲמוֹת יְהוָה אֲדֹנִי נִלָּחֶם וְרָעָה לֹא־תִמָּצֵא בְךָ מִיָּמֶיךָ׃<br>וַיָּקָם אָדָם לִרְדָפְךָ וּלְבַקֵּשׁ אֶת־נַפְשֶׁךָ וְהָיְתָה נֶפֶשׁ אֲדֹנִי צְרוּרָה בִּצְרוֹר הַחַיִּים אֵת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְאֵת נֶפֶשׁ אֹיְבֶיךָ יְקַלְּעֶנָּה בְּתוֹךְ כַּף הַקָּלַע׃ |

[146] See color coding - green for when she calls David, "my lord," and blue for when she calls herself, "your maid."

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|---|---|
| (30) And so, when God has done for my lord all the good God has spoken to you, and has appointed you ruler of Israel,<br>(31) this will not be a stumbling and a trepidation of the heart to my lord, to have shed blood needlessly and for my lord to have carried out his own rescue. And when God has caused my lord to prosper, you will remember your maid." | וְהָיָה כִּי־יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה לַאדֹנִי כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֹת־הַטּוֹבָה עָלֶיךָ וְצִוְּךָ לְנָגִיד עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל:<br>וְלֹא תִהְיֶה זֹאת לְךָ לִפּוּקָה וּלְמִכְשׁוֹל לֵב לַאדֹנִי וְלִשְׁפְּךְ־דָּם חִנָּם וְלְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֲדֹנִי לוֹ וְהֵיטִב יְהוָה לַאדֹנִי וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת־אֲמָתֶךָ: |

Whereas Nabal disregards David and treats him as an insignificant figure earlier in verse 10,[147] Abigail is the first person to actually refer to David as the king he will become, ruler of Israel.[148] According to Alice Ogden Bellis, "From the narrator's perspective, Abigail's prophecy concerning David's royal future is her most important utterance."[149] Abigail affirms the belief that God will give David a lasting legacy, and in her last words, she indicates that she wants to be a part of that.

This moment of Abigail's validation of David's kingship solidifies her place in Jewish tradition as a woman of note. In the Talmud and midrashic collections, there are several mentions of Abigail's virtue and influence. In Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:4, in a discussion of how many wives a king was allowed to have, the text states:

> The king **"shall not add many wives for himself"** (Deuteronomy 17:17), **but** only **eighteen. Rabbi Yehuda says: He** may **add many** wives **for himself, provided that they are not** like those who **turn his heart** away from reverence for God. **Rabbi Shimon says: Even** if he wants to marry only **one** wife, if **she turns his heart away,**

[147] I Samuel 25:10, Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many slaves nowadays who run away from their masters."
[148] Levenson, pp. 20.
[149] Bellis, Alice Ogden. *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes : Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*. Louisville, KY, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994. Pp. 148.

**he should not marry her. If so, why is it stated: "He shall not add many wives for himself"?** This teaches **that even** if his wives are **like Abigail,** who was righteous and prevented David from sin, it is prohibited for him to have many wives.[150]

While the rabbis decide that "too many" wives would be more than eighteen, the caveat is that even if they were all like Abigail, righteous and good hearted, the king is still prohibited from having more. The bar is set high with Abigail and she is increasingly the model of the ideal woman. Her status is further examined in an extended passage from Tractate *Megillah* in the Babylonian Talmud, where the rabbis continue to elevate her, however in a confounding way for feminist interpretation:

*Megillah 14a*

The Gemara asks with regard to the prophetesses recorded in the *baraita*: **Who were the seven prophetesses?** The Gemara answers: **Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther**...**Abigail** was a prophetess, **as it is written: "And it was so, as she rode on the donkey, and came down by the covert of the mountain"** (I Samuel 25:20). The Gemara asks: Why does it say: **"By the covert [*beseter*] of the mountain"? It should have said: From the mountain.** The Gemara answers that in fact this must be understood as an allusion to something else. **Rabba bar Shmuel said: Abigail,** in her attempt to prevent David from killing her husband Nabal, came to David and questioned him **on account of** menstrual **blood that comes from the hidden parts [*setarim*]** of a body. How so? **She took** a blood-stained cloth **and showed it to him,** asking him to rule on her status, whether or not she was ritually impure as a menstruating woman. **He said to her: Is blood shown at night?**

[150] Mishnah Sanhedrin 2:4, translation from sefaria.org.

One does not examine blood-stained clothes at night, as it is difficult to distinguish between the different shades by candlelight. **She said to him:** If so, you should also remember another *halakha*: **Are** cases of **capital law tried at night?** Since one does not try capital cases at night, you cannot condemn Nabal to death at night.[151]

*Megillah 15b*

To complete the discussion about the prophetesses, the Gemara cites a *baraita* in which **the Sages taught: There were four women of extraordinary beauty in the world: Sarah, and Abigail, Rahab, and Esther...Rahab aroused impure thoughts by her name**; **Yael, by her voice; Abigail, by remembering her; Michal, the daughter of Saul, by her appearance.**[152]

In this discussion, Abigail begins as a prophetess, not necessarily in name but in deed. She is in good company with other significant women in Jewish tradition, including Deborah and Huldah. However, the rabbis offer two insights that suggest their actual impression of Abigail is less dignified than it would seem. First, in the explanation of Abigail as prophetess, they applaud her legal argumentation, but frame her rationale and approach as gendered. They suggest that she comes to David in the middle of the night to ask him to rule on her purity after menstruation, something that David would not necessarily be qualified to do. By stating that blood stains cannot be examined at night, she reminds David that so too is the rule of judgment and punishment in regards to Nabal. While she navigated the interaction and got David to arrive at the final result of leaving Nabal alive, the rabbis only allowed

[151] BT Megillah 14a-b, translation from sefaria.org.
[152] BT Megillah 15b, translation from sefaria.org.

Abigail's character to be knowledgeable in the womanly realm. By establishing menstrual impurity as the assumed topic of Abigail's approach to David, they carefully define a gendered framework for her.

Second, at the end of the Talmudic discussion, she is identified by her beauty. Thus, the rabbis give her authority, and then in the same breath, minimize its impact by focusing on her physical appearance. At their core, the rabbis struggled with the notion of God entrusting prophecy and power to women. They consistently reframe the narrative to fit their patriarchal context.[153] The rabbis note that specifically impure thoughts arise in *remembering* Abigail, the request she makes of David at the end of their interaction.[154] Also critical of Abigail's request to be remembered by David, in *the Legends of the Jews*, Louis Ginzberg suggests that while Abigail is spoken of as one of the most compelling members of David's family, this request was a moment of weakness:

> But the most important among the wives of David was Abigail, in whom beauty, wisdom, and prophetical gifts were joined…Not even Abigail was free from the feminine weakness of coquetry. The words "remember thine handmaid" should never have been uttered by her. As a married woman, she should not have sought to direct the attention of a man to herself.[155]

The story of Abigail is brief and yet full of possibility for her as a strong female character in Jewish tradition. As Juliana Claassens writes:

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[153] More discussion to follow in conclusion.
[154] The rabbis emphasize *remembering* Abigail as a reference to I Samuel 25:31 when Abigail asks David to remember her once he has come into power.
[155] Ginzberg, Louis, et al. *The Legends of the Jews.* 1913. Translated by Henrietta Szold, Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1969. Volume 4, Chapter 4.

> Reading the story of Abigail in terms of a feminist framework helps one to idetify a remarkable portrait of female agency...Abigail is portrayed in this narrative as a woman in control - a woman who acts independently, so resisting the patriarchal strongholds of her society.[156]

Without a given title or position of authority, Abigail uses her wit, quick thinking, and good judgment to skillfully influence the course of this historical narrative. She uses power over Nabal and David, but more striking is her power to act. The servant comes to tell Abigail, not Nabal, of David's advance, showing the trust she has of her household and the confidence she has in her ability to change the course of action. Abigail wields her power well and is indeed remembered for it.

[156] Claassens, L. Juliana. "An Abigail Optic: Agency, Resistance, and Discernment in I Samuel 25." *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, edited by L. Juliana Claassens and Carolyn J. Sharp, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, pp. 21–38. Pp. 25.

## Athaliah (II Kings 11)

Unlike Devorah and Huldah who were granted authority by their status as prophets, Athaliah takes her queenship by force. Athaliah, a queen of Judah, has been called ruthless, murderous, vicious, and villainous.[157] She has a lust for power that ends in violence and thus, is generally not remembered favorably. Athaliah's story is not one often told, in part because it comes at the end of the Book of Kings in a complicated narrative of kingship, and in part because hers is a story that is more troubling than uplifting. In addition to telling Athaliah's story, this analysis will consider what it means for a woman to assert her power in a destructive way and assess why she acted in the way she did.

Athaliah's story comes amidst family rivalries, violence for the sake of power, and unrest in and between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Born of Israel, she is betrothed to a prince of Judah to unite the kingdoms. She is the daughter of King Ahab of Israel, wife of King Jehoram of Judah, and, eventually, mother of Ahaziah. Ahaziah was killed by Jehu, a military commander and later king of Israel, acting on orders from the prophet Elisha as an agent of divine judgment against the House of Ahab. Not only did Jehu kill Ahaziah, but he also gathered and struck down any member of the House of Ahab he could find.

Upon hearing of the death of her son, Ahaziah, and the threat to her family, Athaliah has all other royal heirs or competitors to the throne killed. She assumes the throne and rules for six years. Meanwhile, Jehoash, Athaliah's infant grandson and son of Ahaziah, is spared by his aunt, Jehosheba, and hidden for six years in the Temple. Jehosheba and her husband, Jehoiada, a priest, secretly raise the child. When Jehoash is seven years old, they anoint him as king and present him to the people, who cheer, "Long live the king!" Athaliah comes out

[157] Tikva Fymer-Kensky categorizes Athaliah as a villain (2002, pp. 85); Claudia Camp calls her ruthless (Bellis 1994, pp. 169).

to see what the commotion is about only to realize what is happening. She yells "Treason!" and rips her clothes as if in mourning. Jehoiada's guards seize her and drag her away from the House of God, to be put to death by sword. Jehoiada then recommits the people and land to God, turning away from the Baal worship that had taken root under Athaliah's reign.

The text says very little else about Athaliah. It does not go into depth on her reign or her relationships. Aside from the Baal worship that was widespread, it is unclear what her actions and impact were as a ruler. There is a repeat of Athaliah's story in II Chronicles 22-24.[158] It is a condensed and reworked version of the narrative in II Kings with a few minor differences. For example, in II Chronicles, after her demise she is referred to as עֲתַלְיָהוּ הַמִּרְשַׁעַת (*Athaliahu ha'mirsha'at*), "Athaliah the Wicked.".[159]

There are only a few brief mentions of Athaliah in midrash.[160] While Athaliah is the only woman who reigned as queen of Israel as a solo monarch, she is not the only queen in the sacred text. In Esther Rabbah 3:2, her queenship is recognized by the rabbis:

> *"It is governed by women"* (Isaiah 3:12): Four women gained rulership in the world, and they were Jezebel and Athaliah from Israel and Semiramis and Vashti from the gentile nations of the world.[161]

The original text never fully embraces Athaliah as Queen of Israel, but rather phrases it as, וַעֲתַלְיָה מֹלֶכֶת עַל־הָאָרֶץ (*v'Athaliah molechet al ha'aretz*), "Athaliah reigns over the land."[162] To acknowledge the passivity of the wording, commentator Robert Alter writes,

[158] This is true about several stories from the Book of Kings.
[159] II Chronicles 24:7.
[160] Kadari, Tamar. "Athaliah: Midrash and Aggadah." *Jewish Women's Archive*, www.jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/athaliah-midrash-and-aggadah.
[161] Esther Rabbah 3:2, translation from sefaria.org.
[162] II Kings 11:3.

"Given that she has violently usurped the throne, her reign is indicated only through the participle aside."[163]

The two additional places where Athaliah is cited in the midrash have to do with idolatry. Known for supporting and spreading Baal worship, Athaliah's neglect of God and destruction of the Temple are noted in two separate midrashim:

*Ruth Rabbah 4:5*

Rabbi Tanchuma in the name of the Rabbis said: Three things the lower Beit Din decreed and the upper Beit Din agreed with them; and these were: to greet someone with the name [of God], the megillah of Esther, and tithing. From where comes the greeting? As it is said, Those that think to cause My people to forget My name (Jeremiah 23:27). When did they think this? In the days of Athaliah.[164]

*Exodus Rabbah 40:3*

David laid the groundwork for the Holy Temple; Solomon built it; Athaliah, mother of Ahaziah, and her sons, disconnected the golden nails of the Holy Temple; Jehoiada repaired it.[165]

These midrashim are significant in that they connect Athaliah to the line of David, the very thing that she sought to destroy.[166] Modern midrash is not so different in its lack of desire to tell Athaliah's story. She is largely skipped over by many contemporary scholars who aim to broaden the voices of biblical women. This omission could be temporary as the

[163] Alter, pp. 566.
[164] Ruth Rabbah 4:5, translation from sefaria.org.
[165] Exodus Rabbah 40:3, translation from sefaria.org.
[166] In the Book of Ruth, the offspring of Ruth and Boaz eventually lead to David, thus founding the Davidic line, which God promises to uphold. The Kingdom of Judah is the line of David.

modern midrash genre grows, however Athaliah's cruelty might not be appealing for midrashic retelling. The drama and complexity of her story, however, were perfect fodder for Jean Racine, 17th century French playwright.[167] Racine wrote a play based on this biblical narrative, entitled *Athalie*, which also later inspired 18th century Baroque composer, George Handel, to produce an oratorio by the same name.[168]

Athaliah's story is perplexing, to say the least. Many commentators and readers of this text focus on the moment when Athaliah took drastic action and killed the heirs who could challenge her for power. By choosing to exercise this aggressive power-over, it is clear that she holds power, but she doesn't necessarily use it in the best way. For feminist reading, Athaliah's character, while not the only negative or evil woman in the biblical text, is a challenge. As Susan Niditch describes:

> The specific portrayals of Jezebel and Athalia partake of a conventionalized typos of the evil, domineering, too powerful woman living through her control of a weak husband or son. This archetype, laced through the western tradition is, in Jungian terms, the negative aspect of the feminine: the feared, devouring mother.[169]

This archetype is one that Elizabeth Cady Stanton prefers to reject altogether. Her review of Athaliah is sharp, ready to erase her from the narrative:

> The daughter of a king, the wife of a king, and the mother of a king, should have had some mercy on her family descendants. Personal ambition can never compensate for

[167] Mann, Albert. "Reviewed Work: Racine's Biblical Masterpieces, Esther and Athalie by Jean Racine, James Bruner." *The French Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1929, pp. 55–57.
[168] Lee, Jonathan Rhodes. "Handel's Little-Known Third Oratorio: The Juicy, Murderous Athalia." *San Francisco Classical Voice*, 14 Apr. 2019, www.sfcv.org/content/handel%E2%80%99s-little-known-third-oratorio-juicy-murderous-emathaliaem.
[169] Niditch, Susan. "Portrayals of Women in the Hebrew Bible." *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, edited by Judith R. Baskin, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1998, pp. 25–45. Pp. 37.

the loss of the love and companionship of kindred. Such characters as Athaliah are abnormal, their lives not worth recording.[170]

This disappointed response is not surprising from Stanton, as her efforts in biblical commentary aimed to lift up the success, piety, and heroism of women in the Bible as models. Not knowing more about Athaliah's circumstance, background, or intention, her murderous rage and power coup are her lasting legacy.

Athaliah's status as a villain is often marked as a forgone conclusion based on her family of origin. Many commentators refer to the study by historian H.J. Katzenstein on the topic of Athaliah's parentage.[171] In the question of paternity, both Ahab and his father, Omri are possibilities.[172] For purposes of this study, it does not so much matter who her father is, but rather who is her mother and female influence. A majority of scholars automatically name Ahab's wicked wife, Jezebel, as Athaliah's mother, but Katzenstein's more critical assessment is that Jezebel is unlikely to be her mother based on the timeline and how close they would be in age. He does concede that Athaliah would have been educated and supervised by Jezebel, thus serving as a mother figure regardless of her genetic connection.[173] The text does not necessarily give another option of who her mother could be which is why many assume it to be Jezebel, but it is not unusual that Ahab would have had additional wives or concubines beyond Jezebel. Athaliah's presumed connection to Jezebel has had a significant impact on understanding Athaliah. According to Alter, "One should keep in mind that Athaliah appears to be the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel, and she takes after her mother

[170] Stanton, Commentary on Kings, pp. 81.
[171] Katzenstein, H. J. "Who Were the Parents of Athaliah?" *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1955, pp. 194–197.
[172] In II Kings 8:18, an unnamed woman assumed to be Athaliah is listed as daughter of Ahab; in II Kings 8:26, Athaliah is specially named as daughter of Omri.
[173] Katzenstein, pp. 197.

in viciousness."[174] While Athaliah behaves badly of her own accord, the underlying assumption is that she does not know any better because of the way she was brought up.

It is possible to acknowledge the harm that Athaliah caused and also consider her vulnerability and pain. Claudia Camp empathizes with Athaliah as she aptly frames Athaliah's position. "On the one hand, Athaliah considered herself greatly threatened; on the other, she could not have ruled for six years without support."[175] Psychology and one's lived experience have much to say about the way one acts when they feel that their life and existence is in jeopardy. The threat from Jehu and possibly others who would have stepped in to take power, in addition to the grief over Ahaziah's death, might have been sufficient enough to cause Athaliah a momentary break with reality. Royal politics are such that as queen-mother, Athaliah likely had a council in place, ready to support her rule and keep her in power as long as possible. She reigned for six years, and while little is known of that time from the text, she would not have been able to stay in power for that long without the support and protection of others.

Some scholars pose the question of how the narrative might have been different if Athaliah had been able to break out of the cycle of wickedness and respond differently in that moment of loss and transition. Peter DeHaan and Tikva Frymer-Kensky ponder what might have happened if Athalia had positively nurtured her son, or further, if she had groomed a successor rather than kill them all?[176] She could have been equally influential as queen-mother or regent while Joash or others were growing up. She does serve as

[174] Alter, pp. 565.
[175] Bellis (1994), pp. 169.
[176] DeHaan, Peter. *Women of the Bible: The Victorious, the Victims, the Virtuous, and the Vicious*. Spiritually Speaking Publishing, 2018. Pp. 105-16. Also found in Frymer-Kensky (2002), pp. 85.

queen-mother for the year that Ahaziah reigned as king, and she never tries to take over while he is still living.[177] It is only in her grief that she takes extreme measures.

Ultimately, Athaliah's story is a conumdrum for feminist bible reading. She is a woman threatened by men, surrounded by patriarchal institutions, and yet her actions go against a sense of morality. Ironically, the savior of the story is Jehosheba, who, by whisking away her baby nephew, Joash, saves the Davidic line.[178] For as little as there is written about Athaliah, even less exists on Jehosheba. This proves that there is much work to be done to bring these women out of the shadows.

[177] In II Kings 10:13, Athaliah is mentioned as the queen-mother (הַגְּבִירָה).
[178] II Kings 11:2.

## Huldah (II Kings 22)

In the time of Josiah, King of Judah, great religious and political reformations take place.[179] Inspired by the reign of his grandfather, Hezekiah, Josiah works to align the kingship and the people more towards the Davidic legacy and away from generations of idol worship. As part of these efforts, Josiah commissions the cleaning and repair of the House of God, the Holy Temple. During the work, the high priest, Hilkiah, finds a scroll, an unknown "book of teaching" referred to as סֵפֶר הַתּוֹרָה (*sefer hatorah*).[180] The scroll is then given to the scribe, Shaphan, who, after reading it, immediately rushes to share it with the king.

Upon hearing the contents of scroll, Josiah rips his clothes in mourning, dismayed by what he has heard. He says, "For great indeed must be the wrath of God that has been kindled against us, because our fathers did not obey the words of this scroll to do all that has been prescribed for us."[181] Josiah instructs the priests to "go inquire of God," on behalf of the people, to understand the meaning and implications of the book.[182]

It is here that the prophetess Huldah is introduced. Without much fanfare, Huldah immediately addresses the men concerning the scroll. She validates the book as the word of God and offers a grim view of future destruction as a result of the people forsaking the God of Israel. Huldah concludes by offering consolation to the king of Judah who has attempted to walk in the way of God and has a humble reaction to the scroll. For this, she says, the destruction will happen after his death, shielding him from having to witness the forthcoming disaster.

[179] The following is a summary of II Kings 22.
[180] II Kings 22:8.
[181] II Kings 22:13.
[182] Ibid.

Huldah's role, however brief, is incredibly powerful. First of all, although this is disputed by some later rabbinic commentary, the biblical text indicates that there is no astonishment or hesitation that the prophet is a woman, and the validity of her word is not questioned. Robert Alter points out that Huldah verified the book's legitimacy without even reading it or hearing about its contents, and in this way, she demonstrated that her prophecy was authentic.[183] Although the rabbis are disparaging of why Huldah was chosen and not Jeremiah, as discussed below, she holds the title of prophet, which is a status granted by God, not human beings. This in itself elevates her authority in the larger context of a male dominated society.

Furthermore, by affirming the contents of the scroll, Huldah is the first to authenticate a document as the word of God and give it legitimacy. This scroll is considered by some scholars to be the Book of Deuteronomy with the recounting of the people Israel's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, concluding with the blessings and curses, of which Josiah was particularly afraid.[184] As Claudia Camp writes, "Huldah authenticates a document as being God's word, thereby affording it the sanctity required for establishing a text as authoritative, or canonical."[185] From this moment on, there is a new phase of biblical interpretation, with Huldah not only reading the text for what it says, but also being able to apply the ancient words to the context of her own society.[186]

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[183] Alter, pp. 602.
[184] Glatt-Gilad, David. "Deuteronomy: The First Torah." *Thetorah.com*, 2015, www.thetorah.com/article/deuteronomy-the-first-torah. The first academic reference to the scroll being certified as Deuteronomy is in 1805 by W. M. L. de Wette. Scholars point to the similarities between Deuteronomy and the reforms Josiah makes in II Kings as evidence for this claim.
[185] Meyers (2000), pp. 96.
[186] Frymer-Kensky (2002), pp. 326.

Midrash has much to say about Huldah's role and her validation of the scroll. The rabbis begin by trying to assess or maybe even justify why the king's men went to Huldah and not to Jeremiah and Zephaniah, other known prophets at the time. It was said that among the three, Jeremiah would prophesy in the marketplaces, Zephaniah in the synagogues, and Huldah to the women.[187] In that case, how did Huldah become the chosen prophet of this pivotal moment?

In Megillah 14b, the question is posed: "How could Josiah himself ignore Jeremiah and send emissaries to Huldah?"[188] In part, the rabbis are questioning the hierarchy among the prophets, believing that Jeremiah clearly held higher status than Huldah. What is read between the lines, however, is the question of gender. Stemming from this topic, there are many opinions offered both in the Talmudic text itself, as well as in later commentaries.

On the issue of hierarchy, Rav says that because Jeremiah and Huldah are related to one another through the line of Rahab, Jeremiah would have had no problem with Huldah's presence and authority.[189] They can accept her presence, but again press the question of why Josiah did not start with Jeremiah before going to Huldah. In all actuality, Josiah himself never indicates who the men should go to in order to seek the word of God, a detail that is assumed in the rabbinic discussion.[190] To that end, Rabbi Yochanan suggests that Jeremiah was not available at the time, as he was engaged in the effort to bring back the ten tribes from their exile. Addressing the issue of gender, Rabbi Sheila posits that they went to Huldah because women by their nature are more compassionate and this was indeed a delicate topic.[191] Later commentator, the Maharsha, elaborates that since women are more merciful or

[187] Radak on II Kings 22:14; Marketplaces are considered the life of society at that time, broadening Jeremiah's audience and elevating his status.
[188] BT Megillah 14b. This comes in the midst of the rabbis conversation about the seven prophetesses.
[189] Ibid.
[190] II Kings 22:13.
[191] BT Megillah 14b.

compassionate than men, Huldah would indeed pray for Josiah and his people that such an evil decree be averted.[192] Huldah's feminine compassion is highlighted also by Louis Ginzberg in *the Legend of the Jews*. He writes, "The proud, dignified answer of the prophetess was that the misfortune could not be averted from Israel, but the destruction of the Temple, she continued consolingly, would not happen until after the death of Josiah."[193] Ginzberg concludes that while Huldah could not change the fate of the people, she attempted to deliver the news with compassion for Josiah and the great change that was about to befall the community of Israel.

Still unsatisfied, the rabbis turn to Huldah's choice of words regarding the king to demean her authority:

> **Rav Naḥman said: Haughtiness is not befitting a woman.** And a proof to this is that **there were two haughty women, whose names were** identical to the names of **loathsome** creatures. **One,** Deborah, **was called a hornet,** as her Hebrew name, Devorah, means hornet; **and one,** Huldah, **was called a weasel,** as her name is the Hebrew term for that creature. From where is it known that they were haughty?...**With regard to** Huldah, **the weasel, it is written: "Say to the man** that sent you to me" (II Kings 22:15), **but she did not say: Say to the king.**[194]

The reason given for this critique of Huldah is that upon receiving the emissaries from the king, Huldah begins her prophetic speech by saying: "Thus said Adonai, the God of Israel: Say to **the man** who sent you to me…"[195] The rabbis object that she did not refer to

[192] Rabbi Shmuel Eidels (1555-1631), commentary on Megillah 14b.
[193] Ginzberg, Volume 4, Chapter 9.
[194] BT Megillah 14b, translation from sefaria.org.
[195] II Kings 22:15.

Josiah as “King,” his title of respect and honor, instead calling him “the man.” There are two key points the rabbis neglect to acknowledge in this conclusion of her character. The first is that in the following verses, she refers to the “king of Judah” twice, once in regard to the scroll he read and once in her instructions to the men to repeat these words to him.[196] Although she does not mention Josiah specifically by name, his position of authority is not forgotten by Huldah. The second point is that her words are from the spirit of God, as was understood in her role and title of prophet.[197] Thus, if the rabbis want to take issue with Josiah being referred to as a simple man, their quarrel is with God, not Huldah.

In a slightly later text, a narrative midrash called Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, there is another attempt to undermine Huldah’s origins as a prophet altogether.[198] While the biblical text never sheds light on Huldah’s history or how she came to acquire her gifts of prophecy, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer claims that Huldah only got the spirit of God because of the charity and kindness of her husband:

> Rabbi Azariah said: Know thou the efficacy of charity. Come and see from the instance of Shallum, son of Tikvah, who was one of the important men of his generation, giving charity every day. What did he do? He filled the bottle with water, and sat at the entrance of the city, and he would give water to every person who came on the way, restoring his soul to him. On account of the charity which he did, the Holy Spirit rested upon his wife, as it is said, "So Hilkiah the priest… went unto Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum, the son of Tikvah" (2 Kings 22:14).[199]

[196] II Kings 22:16, II Kings 22:18.
[197] The phrase “Thus said God” or “Declares God” is repeated 4 times over 6 verses (II Kings 22:15-20), thus affirming that these words are of God and not of Huldah herself.
[198] Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer is estimated to be written in the 8th or 9th century, whereas the Babylonian Talmud was canonized around 600 CE.
[199] Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 33:9, translation from sefaria.org.

The biblical text says nothing of Huldah's husband other than the fact that he is the "keeper of the wardrobe."[200] Aside from the fact that a prophet's status is granted by God, not by other people, by making her spiritual leadership dependent on the character of her husband, the rabbis serve to redefine her authority as not as her own. This notion of a woman being described or seen only in relation to the men in her life is still a concern, one that has been the topic of great debate over the centuries.

One such debate was over a woman's right to vote in the United States, coming to a head in the 19th century, nearly 10 centuries after Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer. In her critical examination of the Bible based on the premise that its attitude toward women reflects prejudice from a less civilized period, Elizabeth Cady Stanton writes that Huldah is, "the greatest character among the women thus far mentioned."[201] She reveres Huldah's wisdom and clear expertise on the subject of jurisprudence over the men in her life. She continues:

> Although Jeremiah and Zephaniah were prophets at this time, yet the king chose Huldah as the oracle. She was one of the ladies of the court, and resided in the second rank of buildings from the royal palace. Marriage, in her case, does not appear to have been any obstacle in the way of individual freedom and dignity. She had evidently outgrown the curse of subjection pronounced in the Garden of Eden, as had many other of the Jewish women.[202]

For Stanton, the idea of a woman being in a position of leadership, her authority not being questioned, and her personal life not lacking, must have been the ultimate role model for her cause. Stanton's generation of women were fighting for the ability to be heard as

[200] II Kings 22:14.
[201] Stanton, Commentary on Kings, pp. 82.
[202] Ibid., pp. 82-83.

equal partners, or at the very least to engage in social reform that demanded a woman's right to vote. Although much progress has been made, this is something that 21st century women are still fighting for, less for equal rights and more for equity in all spheres of influence and life. While Huldah's experience might have been an exception compared to other women in that time period, she does stand out as an exemplary model of a woman's prophetic power and leadership.

While the traditional midrash is divided about what to make of Huldah's authority and role as a female prophet, contemporary midrash embraces her and lifts up her story. In particular, Athalya Brenner and Rabbi Jill Hammer offer interpretations of Huldah's experience. Brenner draws more on the biblical and midrashic text, interspersing Huldah's voice and thought process where it was otherwise missing, especially as it relates to why she was called on rather than her male counterparts.[203] Alternatively, Hammer's creative writing presents Huldah as strong willed and firm in her interaction with the men, and deeply grappling over the contents and validity of the scroll.[204]

In a integrated reading of feminism and power, Tikva Frymer-Kensky comments on why Huldah was so easily accepted as a female prophet while acknowledging the restrictions of the role and distinction between prophet and priest:

> Women could be expected to be prophets and to have prophetic authority to declare something a vital part of sacred tradition. Yet women were not priests. The presence of women as prophets but not priests may be attributed to the fact that prophecy is by its very nature nonbureaucratic. Prophets operate individually, without a hierarchy of

[203] Brenner, Athalya. *I Am...Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005.
[204] Hammer, Jill. *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women*. Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 2004.

command. As a result, their authority is based on personal charisma and believability rather than on an organization power base.[205]

Frymer-Kensky suggests that prophets operate outside of the hierarchical and, perhaps, patriarchal structure. While that separation offers a deeper understanding of how female prophets like Huldah and Deborah could be so easily heeded, it also reminds the reader that some areas of society, such as the priesthood, have never been open to women. Thus, Huldah has the power to prophesy, but not necessarily further power over anything else.

As with many of the women explored in the case studies of this thesis, Huldah is not a household name in the way that Sarah or Miriam are. Yet Huldah, according to Rabbi Tamara Eskenazi, is "perhaps Israel's most successful prophet".[206] Without her, the preservation and transmission of the tradition might have been lost. Thanks to Huldah, a woman with established authority and compassionate leadership, the teachings live on today.

[205] Frymer-Kensky (2006), pp. 161.
[206] Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. "V'zot Hab'rachah: Another View." *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Edited by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L Weiss, New York, URJ Press, 2007. Pp. 1284.

## Conclusion

The stories of these women are just the beginning, a glimpse into the many female characters in our sacred text. While the reason for selecting these women was based on the power that they possessed and utilized, their stories are actually linked as pivotal moments in the narrative, as Frymer-Kensky explains:

> Deborah and Rahab are the literary bookends that surround the conquest of Canaan, which is nestled inside the greater section, about 'Israel in the land of Israel' that occupies Joshua-Judges-1 and 2 Samuel-1 and 2 Kings; and that history is itself bracketed by Rahab and the prophet Huldah.[207]

Not a part of this list is Athaliah, and one might wonder what she is doing as a case study among these other women. Athaliah's is a story that does not have a happy beginning or end, but she is a wife, a mother, and a queen - a crowned queen with no authority. Perhaps because she seized her power by force and violence, or perhaps because her actions were displeasing to God, she was never going to win favor or success.[208] Her story is intriguing more for what is not there than what is. Yes, she is a queen, a conferred role of power, but what are the costs of how she got there and how does she use that power during her reign? Hers is the ultimate example of power misused, one that cannot be ignored, even if Elizabeth Cady Stanton would prefer it.[209]

Whether or not their societal context confers it upon them, these five women all wield power, albeit in different ways. Rahab and Abigail use their power with intelligence and

[207] Frymer-Kensky (20020, pp. 300.
[208] II Kings 8:27, those who walk in the ways of the House of Ahab do what is displeasing to God; II Kings 11:2, Jehosheba, sister of Ahaziah, immediately protects and hides baby Joash to raise up against Athaliah one day.
[209] See footnote 170 in the Athaliah chapter.

resourcefulness. While their contexts are vastly different - a prostitute versus a wealthy wife - they both have the mental acumen to seize a moment of opportunity that will protect them and in turn lift them up. Their actions and words are powerful even though they are not in positions of formal authority or leadership, particularly in the interactions with the respective men of their narratives. In contrast, by being named as prophets, Deborah and Huldah are granted authority and leadership from the ultimate source - God. This is evident in the way people come to them for advice and guidance. Deborah exhibits power-over in dispensing binding judgments, in her leadership of the army, and, specifically, in her relationship with Barak. In some ways, however, she also exists in a power-with relationship with Barak and Yael, as noted previously that her victory requires all three of them to work in concert. Huldah's power is more subtle and her narrative is brief but no less impactful. Her prophecy and validation of the scroll are the pinnacle of her authority which is never questioned by the men. It is only once the rabbininc sages get involved that there are negative impressions of these women.

As discussed in each section of this thesis, the rabbis often express an attitude of disdain or distrust of these women. In some cases, there is a counter text that is laudatory, where the rabbis have positive impressions, but to a modern reader, the criticisms and harsh commentaries are hard to digest. There have been several works to examine the treatment of biblical women by the rabbinic sages of the Talmud and Midrash, in particular by Judith Baskin and Leila Leah Bronner.[210] As Bronner notes, rabbinic teachings have shaped much of the understanding of the biblical narrative and are a significant part of the Jewish canon, thus it is important to study their values, process of interpretation, and environment for a fuller,

[210] Baskin, Judith R. *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature*. University Press of New England, 2002.; Bronner, Leila Leah. *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

more accurate picture.[211] In further study, there is great potential to go more in depth on this topic as an exploration of feminst biblical interpretation and power.[212]

This thesis is a survey, a small sampling of the close reading and interpretation that could be done on the question of women, power, and the biblical narrative. There are additional areas of study for both the field of scholarship and myself as an individual. In consulting the sources, there is a great deal written about femninist biblical interpretation and feminist theories on power, but very little in the way of overlap. Fewell and Gunn author one of the few works that combine gender, power, and the biblical narrative as explicit topics. Inherent in most of the feminist biblical scholarship is a notion of power, but that power is rarely defined and framed in the way that Fewell and Gunn discuss.[213] As explored in the introduction, power and feminism are linked, especially as they relate to patriarchy. Fuchs reminds the reader that since the biblical narrative is so strongly defined by patriarchy, the patriarchal context and its implications should always be considered when reading these women's stories. She writes, "These are not stories of women, but stories of female role models determined and fostered by the strongly developed patriarchal ideology so characteristic of the society in which they lived."[214]

As the field of feminism evolves to meet the needs and realities of the 21st century, it will be interesting to see how that impacts feminist biblical interpretation. Scholz explores this very challenge as she writes:

> After five decades of developing femninst Hebrew Bible scholarship, it should not be surprising that feminist Bible scholars wonder about the next step. After almost every

[211] Bronner, pp. xiii.
[212] The rabbis use their interpretations as a way to assert power over women, both in their time and as a lasting legacy of Jewish law.
[213] For example, in Claassens and Sharp's publication *Feminist Frameworks and the Bible: Power, Ambiguity, and Intersectionality*, they discuss the implications of power, but never explicitly define it as far as I can tell.
[214] Fuchs (1999), pp. 84.

> biblical woman character has been identified, every scholarly method applied, and practically every biblical text analyzed for its gender ideology, the question is, what remains to be done if we do not want to merely give into the neoliberal status quo.[215]

Scholz calls for a paradigm shift, opening up the exegetical field to include new conceptual frameworks and modern discourse. Scholz also says that femninist biblical interpretation has until now been a largely academic field, but there is room to move beyond that realm. In some ways, that is what the movement towards modern midrash accomplishes. The goal of midrash is to fill in the gaps, to tell the stories and bring to light details that the original text omits. In creating modern midrash for these women, their stories come to life and their voices are heard in new and exciting ways.[216] While several sources were consulted for creativity and additional context, these stories were not heavily cited or utilized in the body of this thesis. With more opportunity to study these women, going deeper into their stories, reading, or even creating modern midrash is recommended.

In conclusion, delving into these women's stories has allowed me a deeper appreciation of the nature of the biblical text and how it is read in the modern context. I typically approach the text with the following three questions, as taught to me by my teachers, Rabbis Lisa Grant and Andrea Weiss: "What does the text say? What does it mean? What does it mean to me?"[217] These layers are essential to understanding the text, its context, the individual reader's context, and everything in between. These women's stories are important to tell, even Athaliah's more challenging narrative, because they are a part of

[215] Scholz, pp. xxxi.
[216] Examples of modern midrash reviewed include Penina Adelman, Athalya Brenner, and Jill Hammer.
[217] Grant, Lisa, and Andrea Weiss. "Teaching Bible to Adult Learners." HUC-JIR Class lecture, 2016.

Jewish history and tradition. By continuing to read them and lifting up their voices and experiences, we give them power.

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