THE RISE AND FALL OF THE FEMALE PROPHET

Female Prophecy in Second Temple Judaism in the Popular Imagination of the Past and in Contemporaneous Society

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Abstract

In this paper I will offer an explanation for two seemingly contradictory phenomena: on the one hand we find that in Second Temple times women are given the title 'prophet' more often than before – in the Hebrew Bible (Miriam and Deborah) and in the developing traditions of the interpretation (Sarah, Hannah, Abigail and Esther); on the other hand prophecy is changing as a phenomenon, and as far as we can tell, women are mostly excluded from holding the office. My explanation starts with two observations. The first is that the title 'prophet' gets attribtuted to women in Israel's past not present; this does not threaten patriarchal structures as strong, independent female figures can be said to have existed in the past but not the present. The traditions regarding Deborah's and Huldah's names point in that direction. The second observation is based on recent work by Alex Jassen and Martti Nissinen on prophecy in Qumran in which he argues that inspired interpretation of scripture is how prophecy continues. Inspired interpretation of scripture (such as Pesher literature) is, in classical terms, a form of divination which combines both intuitive and technical aspects, as the interpreter needs to be divinely inspired *and* have acquired substantial amounts of knowledge about the biblical text. This knowledge would have been imparted through schooling, which was mostly unavailable to women. I believe that these two distinct factors account for the two seemingly contradictory phenomena of on the one hand *more* female prophets and on the other *fewer* female prophets in Second Temple Judaism.