

The מתנבאות in Ezekiel 13 Reconsidered

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In this paper I suggest a new interpretation for the background of Ezek 13:17–23. Until recently, most interpreters have viewed the women in this pericope as witches and therefore evil; more recently a number of interpreters have stressed that it is only Ezekiel who regards these women as bad and that they should really be understood as female prophets who competed with Ezekiel. In contrast, I point out that the history of growth of the pericope has to be taken into account. As the text stands, the women are accused of being false prophets, like their male counterparts in vv. 1–16. But in an earlier layer of the text we find the women connected with some form of communication with the dead; this, in turn, fits with the *munabbiātu* found in the Emar texts. Because of the biblical prophets, they had been interpreted as female prophets as well, but the use of the verb *nubbû* in the context of caring/communicating with the dead suggests that they are religious specialists either communicating with or caring for the dead. This and the openness with which they are addressed in the Emar texts suggest that they were highly skilled specialists held in considerable regard. It is likely that the Hebrew מתנבאות originally had a similar function and therefore high social status. The textual history of the book of Ezekiel turns them into female prophets at odds with Ezekiel; reception history turned these women into witches. In their own lifetimes they were probably well-respected religious specialists.

Ezekiel 13:17–23 is part of Ezekiel’s polemics against “false prophets.” Unlike most other words against “false prophets” in the Hebrew Bible, such as Ezek 13:1–16, these verses are addressed not to male prophets but to women who are described as מתנבאות, the *hitpaal* participle in the feminine plural of the root נבא (“to prophesy”). In the past, most interpreters have taken this term to mean “sorceresses”

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or “female soothsayers,” following the Bible’s negative value judgment against such activities in contrast to positively received “proper” prophecy.¹ In the recent debate, however, the majority of scholars understand the “daughters of your people who **התנבא**” as female prophets.² This more recent view is often related to an open attack on the paradigms and value judgments of earlier interpreters who shared the Hebrew Bible’s concept that “prophecy” is good while “magic” and “divination” are bad. It has become clear that this view is apologetic and untenable in the scholarly community.³ The difference between “good” (or white) magic and “bad” (or black) magic and the clear-cut division between (negative) magic and (positive) religion are emic judgments; they are valid within the culture that makes them, but they are not based on “objectively” observable data.

In this article I will present and review the two main interpretations of the pericope in Ezek 13:17–23: (1) the women are not really “good” prophets but “evil” witches; and (2) the women are (good) prophets and magicians. Adducing evidence from Emar, I will then suggest a third reading, which combines elements of the first two: the “daughters of your people” are involved in necromancy of some sort, but this should not be taken to mean that they are of lower status than either the male prophets of Ezek 13:1–16 or Ezekiel himself. This solution is closer to the more traditional reading, but it does not carry the moralistic baggage imposed on the text by earlier exegetes. A corollary of this argument is that 13:1–16 and 13:17–23 were probably not composed as a coherent whole in the first instance, but carefully put together at a later point.

¹See, e.g., William Hugh Brownlee, “Exorcising the Souls from Ezekiel 13:17–23,” *JBL* 69 (1950): 367–73; Walther Eichrodt, *Der Prophet Hesekiel* (ATD 22; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959); Walther Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* (2nd ed.; 2 vols.; BKAT 13.1–2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969), Eng. trans.: *Ezekiel: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (2 vols.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); Henry W. F. Saggs, “‘External Souls’ in the Old Testament,” *JSS* 19 (1974): 1–12; Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Das Buch des Propheten Hesekiel (Ezechiel): Kapitel 1–19* (ATD 22.1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); and Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

²See, e.g., Renate Jost, “Die Töchter deines Volkes prophezeien,” in *Für Gerechtigkeit streiten: Theologie im Alltag einer bedrohten Welt. Für Luise Schottroff zum 60. Geburtstag* (ed. Dorothee Sölle; Gütersloh: Kaiser, 1994), 59–65; Nancy R. Bowen, “The Daughters of Your People: Female Prophets in Ezekiel 13:17–23,” *JBL* 118 (1999): 417–33; Irmtraud Fischer, *Gotteskinderinnen: Zu einer geschlechterfairen Deutung des Phänomens der Prophetie und der Prophetinnen in der Hebräischen Bibel* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 221–34; Paul Joyce, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 482; New York/London: T&T Clark, 2007), 120–22; and Wilda Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 107–9. Somewhat surprisingly, Klara Butting (*Prophetinnen gefragt: Die Bedeutung der Prophetinnen im Kanon aus Tora und Prophetie* [Erev-Rav-Hefte, Biblisch-feministische Texte 3; Knesebeck: Erev-Rav, 2001], 182–83) comments only in passing on this pericope.

³E.g., John G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

I. THE TEXT

Before approaching the content of the text it is necessary to make some preliminary comments on the structure and vocabulary of the pericope. I will first define the pericope and then comment on some particularities of the text. There is a plethora of obscure terms in this text, and in spite of numerous attempts to improve our understanding of these terms, uncertainties still abound.⁴ Nevertheless, there are few significant variants in the versions, apart from where the Hebrew text is either corrupt or difficult to understand.

Delimitation of the Pericope

As early as 1840, Heinrich Ewald remarked that Ezek 12:21–14:11 formed a larger group of literary oracles about true and false prophecy.⁵ It is well known that this group is divided into five subsections, in which the first two (12:21–25 and 12:26–28) and the third and fourth (13:1–16 and 13:17–23) form pairs.⁶ Additionally, there are two themes that hold this larger text together, that of false visions in 12:21–13:16 (and vv. 22–23) and that of consulting the deity in 13:17–14:11. It is difficult to say whether this arrangement is original or was established by later redactors. Because it is so competently arranged, I tend toward the latter option.⁷

The pericope itself is of a composite nature. This is supported by the changes in grammatical gender in the middle of v. 19 and again in v. 20 from feminine plural to masculine plural without any apparent reason for such a change. This is an issue known from elsewhere in the book of Ezekiel (e.g., ch. 1) and, in my view, is the result of the redactional processes that shaped the entire prophetic book.⁸

⁴See, e.g., Saggs, “External Souls,” 1–12; Graham I. Davies, “An Archaeological Commentary on Ezekiel 13,” in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King* (ed. Michael D. Coogan, J. Cheryl Exum, and Lawrence E. Stager; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 108–25; and Marjo C. A. Korpel, “Avian Spirits in Ugarit and in Ezekiel 13,” in *Ugarit, Religion and Culture: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Ugarit, Religion and Culture, Edinburgh, July 1994. Essays Presented in Honour of Professor John C. L. Gibson* (ed. N. Wyatt, W. G. E. Watson, and J. B. Lloyd; Ugaritisch-biblische Literatur 12; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1996), 99–113.

⁵Ewald, *Die Propheten des alten Bundes* (2 vols.; Stuttgart: Adolph Krabbe, 1840–41), 2:254–57. See also Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1–19* (WBC 28; Dallas: Word, 1994), 193; and Block, *Ezekiel 1–24*, 384–86.

⁶This pentapartite structure is reminiscent of several such structures in Amos and elsewhere.

⁷I share Davies’s interpretation that vv. 17–23 were modeled to correspond to vv. 1–16, and that vv. 22–23 are written for that purpose (Davies, “Archaeological Commentary,” 110).

⁸Contra Vladimir Orel (“Textological Notes,” *ZAW* 109 [1997]: 408–13), who thinks that the women put the bands on the arms of men only. While it is true that in modern Judaism

In my view, vv. 17–19a and 20*–21 are the original oracle of doom. This is supported by the fact that vv. 20*–21 consist mainly of vocabulary from 17–19a. Verses 22–23 are a reflection on vv. 17–21*, and 19b is inserted in order to improve the connection between vv. 22–23 and the preceding verses. Indeed, similar developments can be identified also in vv. 1–16. These verses consist of at least two unrelated oracles, each with an announcement of doom. The second oracle (vv. 10–16) is itself preserved in two versions (vv. 10–12 and 13–16). Both of these versions show lexical links between initial criticism and announcement of doom, which are similar to the links in vv. 17–21. Because the prophets in vv. 10–16 are condemned for what could—depending on perspective—either be called “sign acts” or “sympathetic magic,” and because of the similarity of the links in vocabulary, it seems plausible that vv. 10–16 and vv. 17–21 represent the first combination of the oracles out of which ch. 13 grew. It follows that the original oracles are aimed at technical diviners or magicians. If this is the case, it is possible that the root נבא initially referred not only to prophecy but to divination in general, possibly including some forms of magic. If so, the reduction of the meaning of the root to refer only to prophecy is a later development, traces of which may be detectable in vv. 6–9 and 22–23. This profile is more akin to verbal prophecy, and there can be no doubt that the scribes who wrote vv. 8–9 and 22–23 regarded both the נביאים and the מַתְּנַבְאוֹת as diviners who were not among the “true” prophets of YHWH.

Text-Critical and Lexical Remarks

From a text-critical point of view, our pericope does not present any major difficulties; most of the evidence for different textual traditions exhausts itself in the adding or leaving out of אֲדֹנָי before the tetragrammaton (vv. 18 and 20). More interesting is the relative density of possible Akkadian loanwords. The most convincing case is כְּסָתוֹת (v. 20; plural of כְּסָת, “band”), which in all likelihood is a loan of Akkadian *kasitu* (“bondage”; derived from the verb *kasû*, “to bind”).⁹

The other candidate is מְסַפְּחוֹת (v. 18; plural of מְסַפְּחָה). It should probably be connected to Arabic *safih* (“robe of coarse material”), etymologically related to Akkadian *sapāhu* (“to loosen, scatter”).¹⁰ The strong connection of the pericope to

Tefillin are worn only by men, there is no reason to assume that the bands here are truly the direct predecessors of Tefillin; and even if they were, it is by no means sure that they would have been worn (only) by men at this stage.

⁹This solution is considerably easier than Korpel’s suggestion to link כְּסָתוֹת with Akkadian *katāmu* (“to cover”), which is etymologically entirely unrelated to the root כָּסָה (Korpel, “Avian Spirits,” 103). The LXX translates כָּסָה as *προσκεφάλαιον* (“cushion”) here, following the normal postbiblical meaning of כָּסָה (e.g., Saggs, “External Souls,” 2).

¹⁰I do not follow Saggs’s suggestion, adopted by Korpel, that ultimately relies on Carl Brockelmann to relate מְסַפְּחוֹת to Akkadian *musahiptu* (“net”) with a metathesis of /h/ and

Mesopotamia, expressed in words that appear only in this pericope and nowhere else in the entire Hebrew Bible, supports Nancy Bowen's recent reappraisal of the structural link between the pericope and the incantation list *Maqlû*.¹¹ In her reading of the pericope, Ezekiel is using a structure reminiscent of anti-witchcraft incantations, which means that in effect he is using magic while arguing against the women whom he accuses of using magic.

The last expression on which I want to comment is the mysterious אֶת־נִפְשֵׁים לְפָרְחוֹת at the end of v. 20. Contrary to Walther Zimmerli, I do not think that the infinitive לְפָרְחוֹת earlier in the verse is a later addition on the basis of the similar expression at the end of the verse.¹² Instead, I suggest that the last three words are the result of a simple mistake (*aberratio oculi*) of a scribe coming upon מְצַדְדוֹת ("hunting").¹³

One final remark is necessary. The following is based on the assumption, for which I argued above, that vv. 22–23 and the additions with masculine suffixes in vv. 19 and 20 were added later to vv. 17–21*. In its final form, ch. 13 accuses both the male prophets of vv. 1–16 and the female prophets of vv. 17–23 of "false prophecy." In the following discussion I will focus on vv. 17–21 and will for the time being ignore vv. 22–23; only in the conclusion will I refer to the text in its entirety, as this article is initially interested in the first women accused by the text, and only secondarily in the women whom the book of Ezekiel accuses as it now stands. It is important to be clear at the outset: Ezekiel 13 does not portray the women positively nor does the reconstructed oracle underlying the text. This does not, however, mean that we have to follow the assessment of the biblical authors.

/p/ (Saggs, "External Souls," 6–7; Korpel, "Avian Spirits," 103; Brockelmann, *Kurzgefasste vergleichende Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen: Elemente der Laut- und Formenlehre* [PLO 21; Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1908], §60 e δ). Labials and laryngeals are at times metathesized, and Saggs's suggestion would make good sense of the passage. The vocalization, however, seems to make such a derivation less likely. Further, as Davies points out ("Archaeological Commentary," 121), "binding" and "loosening" form a logical pair that is found also in magical texts. Some interpreters return to a suggestion to understand the מספחות as an early form of Tefillin/Phylacteria, e.g., Orel, "Notes," 411–13; and Jost, "Töchter," 60. As far as I can see, the suggestion goes back to Godfrey Rolles Driver, "Linguistic and Textual Problems: Ezekiel," *Bib* 19 (1938): 60–69, 175–87.

¹¹ Bowen, "Daughters," 421–23. See already G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ezekiel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), 144–49; and Alfred Bertholet, *Hesekiel* (HAT 13; Tübingen: Mohr, 1936), 49.

¹² Zimmerli, *Ezechiel*, 284–85.

¹³ Zimmerli's solution is based on evidence from the LXX and the Peshitta, which do not have the expression the first time but do note it the second time. Speculatively, one could surmise that the first scribe added אֶת־נִפְשֵׁים לְפָרְחוֹת following a slip of the eye (*aberratio oculi*). A subsequent scribe added a second masculine plural suffix, resulting in אֶת־נִפְשֵׁיהֶם, which in turn was shortened to אֶת־נִפְשֵׁים in a further mistake. This would fit well with the assumption that vv. 19b, 20aβ, 20bβ were added later. In the absence of evidence, however, this theory must remain speculative.

II. THE STATUS QUAESTIONIS

After these preliminary remarks, we may approach the central topic of the article: What are the role and function of the *מהתנבאות*? Are they “good prophets” or are they “evil witches”? How do we distinguish between these interpretations? Are prophets by definition good, while witches are evil?

In earlier scholarship, exegetes argued that the women in Ezekiel 13 perform magic, playing with the souls of the Israelites. The rhetoric used by these exegetes implies that they thought that the women perform some lower and despicable form of magic, that they are pretending to be prophets and do not deserve the title “prophet.”¹⁴ According to these interpreters, this is why the *hitpael* is employed here: it allegedly implies that the women are just pretending to be prophets. Wilda Gafney has recently shown that the neat distinction between the *niphal* and the *hitpael* of *נבא* cannot be upheld.¹⁵ Indeed, Renate Jost points out that, if *להתנבא* carried such negative connotations, the use of the *hitpael* by Ezekiel to describe his own actions in 37:10 would be rather problematic.¹⁶ Additionally, the use of the participle—indeed, the feminine participle occurs only here¹⁷—instead of the feminine noun *נביאה* (“female prophets”) is often interpreted negatively; it is also used to argue that the *מהתנבאות* are not really prophets.¹⁸

Traditionally, scholars have distinguished between magic and religion on the grounds that religion is supposedly characterized by submission to a/the divine will whereas magic seeks to coerce that divine will.¹⁹ The term “magic” has often

¹⁴See, e.g., Katheryn Pfisterer Darr (“The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *NIB* 6:1073–1607), who describes the women as “female exiles who are accused of playing the prophet”; and Fritz Dumermuth (“Zu Ez. XIII 18–21,” *VT* 13 [1963]: 228–29), who speaks of the women’s “niedere Mantik.” Darr does allow for the fact that the distinction between magic and religion is emic and even within one society people may not agree whether a certain practice is religious or represents magic.

¹⁵Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam*, 36–47, contra Klaus-Peter Adam, “And He Behaved Like a Prophet Among Them’ (1Sam 10:11b): The Depreciative use of *נבא* *Hitpael* and the Comparative Evidence of Ecstatic Prophecy,” *WO* 39 (2009): 3–57. I do not out of hand deny the possibility that the *hitpael* of *נבא* is at times used with negative undertones, but Gafney shows that this is not a coherent principle.

¹⁶Jost, “Töchter,” 59. The form *וְהִתְנַבְּאוּתֵי* with assimilated *ת* is unusual, and some manuscripts have the uncontracted form (*וְהִתְנַבְּאוּתֵי*). *BHS* suggests reading *niphal* *וְהִתְנַבְּאוּתֵי*, as in v. 7. I see no reason for the change other than to avoid a difficult form. The form found in the MT is rare. To my knowledge *להתנבא* assimilates the *ת* only here and in Jer 23:13. For the assimilation of *ת* in the *hitpael* to both *נ* and *ש*, see GKC §54c and Joüon-Muraoka §53e.

¹⁷The masculine participle occurs five times in the plural (Num 11:27; 1 Sam 10:5; 1 Kgs 22:10; 2 Chr 18:9; Jer 14:14) and four times in the singular (three times without the article: 2 Chr 18:7; Jer 26:20; 29:26; once with the article Jer 29:27).

¹⁸See, e.g., Davies, “Archaeological Commentary,” 110.

¹⁹This view is criticized already by Islwyn Blythin, “Magic and Methodology,” *Numen* 17

been used to describe unofficial rites, often hidden and regarded as negative, while “religion” is open and regarded as positive.²⁰ But because one person’s magic can be another’s religion, scholars of religion in general view the distinction as suspect; it is more a value judgment than a description of objective differences. Therefore, recent studies of magic and religion have come to the conclusion that it is impossible to develop objective criteria by which to distinguish between the two.²¹ This means that the terminology of magic and religion does not help to distinguish differences in social function.

In a similar development, the distinction between prophecy and “divination” has become blurred as well. The biblical opposition between divination and prophecy has influenced scholars for a long time, but one of the most important conclusions of recent research into ancient Near Eastern prophecy is that this distinction is based on a misunderstanding of the data. Martti Nissinen has summarized the debate on the relation between ancient Near Eastern prophecy and (technical) divination: “There is a growing tendency in the study of biblical and ancient Near Eastern prophecy to consider prophecy, rather than being in contrast with divination (i.e., consulting the divine world by various means), an integral part of it.”²²

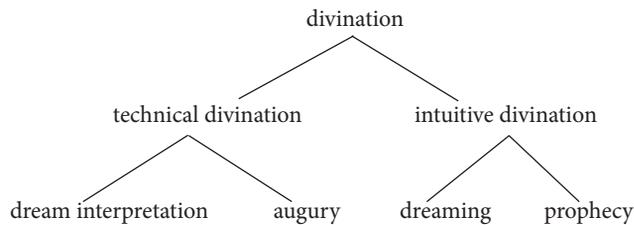
(1970): 45–59: “This misconception also finds expression in the familiar distinction between Magic and Religion in terms of coercion of divine power and submission to the divine will, and in the recurring use of the phrase *ex opere operato*.”

²⁰In his edition of witchcraft texts, Daniel Schwemer (*Rituale und Beschwörungen gegen Schadenzauber* [WVDOG 117; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007], 3) expressed this presentation as follows: “Man darf deshalb davon ausgehen, daß die Beteuerung, der Abwehrzauber werde öffentlich durchgeführt, die gelegentlich in den zugehörigen Gebeten begegnet, oft nicht mehr als eine fromme Redefigur war.”

²¹See, e.g., Gager, *Curse Tablets*, 24–25; Gabriella Frantz-Szabó, “Hittite Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination,” in *CANE* 3:2007–19; and, in the same volume, Jean-Michel de Tarragon, “Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Canaan and Ancient Israel,” 2071–81; and Walter Farber, “Witchcraft, Magic, and Divination in Ancient Mesopotamia,” 1895–1909.

²²Nissinen, *References to Prophecy in Neo-Assyrian Sources* (SAAS 7; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1998), 6. See also Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 150–51; Beate Pongratz-Leisten, *Herrschaftswissen in Mesopotamien: Formen der Kommunikation zwischen Gott und König im 2. und 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (SAAS 10; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1999); Karel van der Toorn, “L’oracle de victoire comme expression prophétique au Proche-Orient ancien,” *RB* 94 (1987): 63–97; Maria de Jong Ellis, “Observations on Mesopotamian Oracles and Prophetic Texts: Literary and Historiographic Considerations,” *JCS* 41 (1989): 127–86; Thomas W. Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 140–47; Hans M. Barstad, “No Prophets? Recent Developments in Biblical Prophetic Research and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy,” *JSOT* 37 (1993): 39–60; James C. VanderKam, “Prophecy and Apocalypics in the Ancient Near East,” in *CANE* 3:2083–94, esp. 2083; and Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, “Prophetismus und Divination—ein Blick auf die keilschriftlichen Quellen,” in *Propheten in Mari, Assyrien und*

The presentation of his argument has led to the rather bizarre situation in which some scholars identify biblical characters as prophets precisely because they perform technical divination. In a recent article, Nissinen has clarified his position, arguing that there is a difference between prophecy and technical divination but that prophecy and technical divination are two sides of the same “coin”: divination.²³ I prefer the terms “technical divination” and “intuitive divination” instead of divination and prophecy, as this terminology helps to clarify the issue. Neither is of an inherently better value than the other: the terms describe different modes of acquiring information from the divine sphere:



The difference between the two types of divination is in the mode of interpretation of the information and not in its acquisition. Thus, a person who dreams a clear message dream is an intuitive diviner, while someone whose dream needs to be interpreted by a dream interpreter is no diviner at all; (s)he is like the liver of the haruspex’s sheep: “paper” on which a deity can write their message. This distinction explains how an intuitive diviner might have a “technique” to induce an altered state of consciousness.

On the basis of these realizations, a new wave of interpreters has firmly established a consensus that the women in Ezekiel 13 are prophets and that their behavior as soul-catchers is part of their intermediary prophetic role between humans and the divine. One opinion of this new wave of scholarship is that the women in Ezekiel 13 are involved in magic connected to pregnancy and childbirth. As far as I can see, the suggestion goes back to Bowen, who argues in favor of this view because Ezekiel 13 uses the language of “binding” and because the women work for barley. Barley and the language of “binding” play a role in Mesopotamian magic related to pregnancy and childbirth, and Bowen contends that they must do so here too. However, the language of “binding” is commonly used in spells and literature that mentions magic, and barley is included as one of the materials in lists of expenditures for many rituals.²⁴

Israel (ed. Matthias Köckert and Martti Nissinen; FRLANT 201; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 33–53.

²³Nissinen, “What Is Prophecy? An Ancient Near Eastern Perspective,” in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East. Essays in Honour of Herbert B. Huffmon* (ed. John Kaltner and Louis Stulman; JSOTSup 378; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 17–37.

²⁴Bowen, “Daughters,” 423–27. Her theory has since been adopted by Ziony Zevit (*The*

Further, Bowen and others argue that the women in Ezekiel 13 must be prophets because magic, divination, and religion are indistinguishable. Bowen calls these women prophets, it seems, because she wants to interpret them in a positive light and calling them sorcerers might put them in a negative light. This, however, relies precisely on the argument of earlier scholarship that she and others rightly criticized—only in reverse. In simplified terms, the old argument says that these women are sorcerers, therefore they are bad. In equally simplified terms the new argument is: they are good, therefore they cannot be sorcerers. Thus, Bowen and others fall into the very same trap into which earlier generations of scholars have fallen.

III. A NEW SUGGESTION

One point that has yet not yet been brought to bear on this particular question is the strikingly close parallel between Ezek 13:17 and the occurrences of **munabbiātu* in four texts from twelfth-century B.C.E. Emar.²⁵ Indeed, while most scholars take the Emar occurrences of nominal forms of the root נבא as referring to prophecy, and female prophecy in particular, I am aware of only one scholar, Mayer Gruber, who explicitly links the Emar *munabbiātu* to the Hebrew מתנבאות.²⁶ However, he does not develop the similarity, perhaps because he regards it as too self-evident:²⁷ female prophets in Ezekiel, female prophets in Emar.

Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches [London: Continuum, 2001], 561–62) and Gafney (Daughters of Miriam, 12).

²⁵The asterisk in front of *munabbiātu* is to indicate that the term is attested only in the oblique plural.

²⁶Mayer I. Gruber, “Women in the Ancient Levant,” in *Women’s Roles in Ancient Civilizations: A Reference Guide* (ed. Bella Vivante; Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), 115–52. The texts were introduced into the debate on the etymology by Daniel E. Fleming (“LÚ and MEŠ in ¹⁶*na-bi-i-meš* and Its Mari Brethren,” *NABU* 1993: 54; “Nābū and *Munabbiātu*: Two New Syrian Religious Personnel,” *JAOS* 113 [1993]: 175–83; “The Etymological Origins of the Hebrew *nabi*: The One Who Invokes God,” *CBQ* 55 [1993]: 217–24), who on their basis argued for an active understanding of Hebrew נביא. John Huehnergard (“On the Etymology and Meaning of Hebrew NĀBĪ,” *EI* 26 [1999]: 88*–93*) criticized their use for determining whether נביא is active or passive, but he did not deny that the two are etymologically linked. Fleming (“Prophets and Temple Personnel in the Mari Archives,” in *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets, and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets* [ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Alice Ogden Bellis; JSOTSup 408; London/New York: T&T Clark, 2004], 44–64) offers a thoughtful reply.

²⁷Gruber writes: “In the published texts from Emar, the feminine plural *munabbiātu* appears to be a clear cognate of the Hebrew *mitnabbe*²*ōt* (‘women who prophesy’; e.g., Ezekiel 13:17). It is mentioned four times, three of them in the phrase ‘Ishkhara, the divine patroness of the prophetesses.’ The fourth reference in an Emar text to a *munabbiātu* occurs in what appears to be a list of portions of meat distributed among various officials including a male diviner and a male scribe” (“Women,” 129).

But are matters quite that straightforward? Ezekiel has a feminine plural participle of the root נבא in the *hitpael* (tD-stem). The Emar texts have **munabbiātu*, a D-stem participle (the equivalent of the Hebrew *piel*) in the feminine plural. If we understand the Hebrew *hitpael* (tD-stem) as a modified D-stem with a t-prefix, both forms are to be understood as feminine plural participles of the root *n.b.*²⁷ in the D-stem.

The four texts in question are (1) Emar 406:5', (2) Emar 373:97', (3) Emar 383:10' and (4) Emar 379:11–12. The first text mentions meat rations for **munabbiātu*, while the other three texts (2–4) are virtually identical and say that the **munabbiātu* are related to the goddess Išhara:

1. Emar 406:5' [...]*bu-uq-qú-ra-tu*₄ ša^{f.meš}*mu-na-bi-ia-ti*
 [...](a kind of) meat of/for the **munabbiātu*²⁸
2. Emar 373:97' ^d*iš-ḥa-ra* ša^{f.meš}*mu_x-nab-bi-ia-[ti]*²⁹
 Išhara of the **munabbiā*[*tu*]
3. Emar 383:10' ^d*iš-ḥa-ra* ša^{f.meš}*mu_x-nab-b[i-ia-ti]*³⁰
 Išhara of the **munabb*[*iātu*]
4. Emar 379:11–12 ¹¹*d*^d*iš-ḥa-ra* ša¹²*mu_x-na-bi-ia-ti*³¹
 Išhara of the **munabbiātu*

In the first instance, the link between Akkadian **munabbiātu* and Hebrew מַנְבִּיאוֹת appears to be based solely on morphology. Until James Barr's critique of the confusion of etymological with semantic/functional equivalence, etymology alone would have been regarded as enough proof that the Emarite and the Judean women were fulfilling the same function in their respective societies, and many scholars believe that the Emarite terms refer to female prophets.³² Instead of reading a

²⁸Daniel Arnaud, *Recherches au pays d'Aštata: Emar VI, Textes sumériens et accadiens*, vol. 3, *Texte* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1986), 402–3.

²⁹Ibid., 353, 360; and Daniel E. Fleming, *Time at Emar: The Cultic Calendar and the Rituals from the Diviner's Archive* (Mesopotamian Civilizations 11; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 244–45 (line 107). The reading *mu_x* for the A sign was suggested by Wolfram von Soden, "Kleine Bemerkungen zu Urkunden und Ritualen aus Emar," *NABU* 1987: §46.

³⁰Arnaud, *Emar VI*/3:377.

³¹Ibid., 375.

³²James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). Among scholars who believe that the Emarite term refers to female prophets, see Akio Tsukimoto, "Emar and the Old Testament: Preliminary Remarks," *AJBI* 15 (1989): 3–24; Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 177–78; Gruber, "Women," 129; idem, "Women's Voices in Micah," *lectio difficilior* 1 (2007), online at http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/07_1/mayer_gruber_womens_voices.htm; Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 89; and Fleming, "Mari Brethren"; Fleming, "*Munabbiātu*"; Fleming, "Etymological Origins." Robert P. Gordon ("From Mari to Moses: Prophecy at Mari and in Ancient Israel," in *Of Prophets*

biblical understanding of prophecy into the texts from Emar, I suggest interpreting both sets of texts in their own context first, before then comparing them with each other. Rather than understanding both terms as referring to female prophets, I understand both as referring to female technical diviners. It is important to note that this is the result of my analysis and not an a priori understanding.

To that aim I suggest looking at the root נבא in Akkadian in general and in Emar in particular. According to the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*, the verb *nabû* normally means “to call” in the G-stem and “to wail” in the D-stem (*nubbû*) in Standard Akkadian. Emar, however, was at the edge of the Akkadian speaking and writing world, and words often had a slightly different meaning in what is called peripheral Akkadian. To the best of my knowledge, the verbal root *n.b.*² occurs only eight times at Emar after excluding names, exclusively in the context of adoption deeds.³³ The idiom in which it occurs is “to *nubbû* my gods and my dead” (*ilāni u mītiya nubbû*). The context makes it likely that the verb refers to some form of interaction with the dead, be it invoking them, caring for them, or talking to them.³⁴

- | | |
|------------------|---|
| 1. RA 77 1:8 | DINGIR.MEŠ- <i>ia</i> ù <i>me-te-ia</i> ¹ lu-ú <i>tu-na-bi</i> ³⁵
She shall invoke/mourn (?) my gods and my dead |
| 2. RA 77 2:11–12 | ¹¹ DINGIR.MEŠ- <i>ia</i> ù <i>me-te-ia</i> ¹² lu-ú <i>tu-na-ab-bi</i> ³⁶
She shall invoke/mourn (?) my gods and my dead |
| 3. Emar 185:2–3 | ² DINGIR.MEŠ- <i>ia</i> ù <i>me-te-ia</i> ³ lu-ú < <i>tu</i> >- <i>na-ab-bi</i> ³⁷
She shall invoke/mourn (?) my gods and my dead |

Visions and the Wisdom of Sages: Essays in Honour of R. Norman Whybray on His Seventieth Birthday [ed. David J. A. Clines and Heather A. McKay; JSOTSup 162; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993], 63–79, esp. 65) is careful to point out the weakness of the argument.

³³Progetto Sinleqiunnini: *The Emar Cuneiform Archive*, online at <http://www.pankus.com/> (accessed May 16, 2008). The Emar-related part of the project is now the “Middle Euphrates Digital Archive,” at <http://virgo.unive.it/emaronline/cgi-bin/index.cgi> (accessed January 9, 2012).

³⁴For studies on the terminology of necromancy, see Karel van der Toorn, “Gods and Ancestors in Emar and Nuzi,” *ZA* 84 (1994): 38–59; Wayne T. Pitard, “Care of the Dead at Emar,” in *Emar: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Syrian Town in the Late Bronze Age* (ed. M. W. Chavalas; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1996), 123–40; and, in the same volume, Brian B. Schmidt, “The Gods and the Dead of the Domestic Cult at Emar,” 141–63. See also Akio Tsukimoto (review of Gary Beckman, *Texts from the Vicinity of Emar in the Collection of Jonathan Rosen* [History of the Ancient Near East/Monographs 2; Padua: Sargon, 1996], *WO* 29 [1999]: 184–90) points out that in RE 94:25–27 the same expression occurs with the verb *kunnu* instead of *nubbû*.

³⁵John Huehnergard, “Five Tablets from the Vicinity of Emar,” *RA* 77 (1983): 11–43.

³⁶Ibid., 16–17. Texts 1–2 were also published as ASJ 13 25–26 (Akio Tsukimoto, “Akkadian Tablets in the Hirayama Collection (II),” *Acta Sumerologica Japan* 13 [1991]: 275–333).

³⁷Arnaud, *Emar* VI/3, 197–98. Jean-Marie Durand (“Tombs familiares et culte des Ancêtres à Emâr,” *NABU* 1989: §112, p. 88) emends the first singular construct D-precativ *lunabbi* to a third person D-durative + *lu*: *lu tunabbi*. As an alternative Durand suggests correcting the text to read *lu-u tu¹-nab¹-bi*.

4. AuOr 5 13:6–7 ⁶DINGIR.MEŠ-*ia* ^dišt[*ar.meš-ia*] ⁷lu-ú *tu!-nab-bi-mi*³⁸
She shall invoke my gods and my goddesses
5. CM 13 3:23–24 ²³DINGIR.MEŠ *u me-te-ia la-<aḥ>-te-ia* ²⁴*a-bi-šu-nu lu-na-ab-bu*³⁹
May they invoke the gods and the dead of Laḥteya, their father
6. Sem 46 2:20–21 ²⁰...DINGIR.MEŠ-*ia* ²¹*u mi-ti-ia ú-na-bu*⁴⁰
They will invoke my gods and my dead
7. RE 23:16–17 ¹⁶DINGIR.MEŠ-*ia* ù ¹⁷me¹-te-ia¹ ^{lo.e.17}lu-ú ⁴tu¹ ¹-na-ab-b[i]⁴¹
May she invoke my gods and my dead
8. RE 30:5–7 ⁵DINGIR.MEŠ¹-*ia* ù ⁶mé-e-te ⁶ša^m ^{tu-ba-a a-b}[*i-šu*]
⁷*ú-na-ab-bi*⁴²
He will/shall invoke my gods and the dead of [his] father Tubâ

Admittedly, the amount of evidence is somewhat meager, so conclusions from this presentation of data have to remain necessarily preliminary. However, as it stands now, the evidence from Emar points to some form of interaction with the dead, rather than prophecy. This is further supported by the connection to the multivalent deity Iṣhara, who appears as a chthonic but also a fertility deity whose main area of responsibility appears to have been the swearing and enforcing of oaths.⁴³ This would leave a wide field for possible duties of the **munabbiātu*. The examination of the meaning of the verbal root *n.b.*² at Emar is important in this context as it offers us at least one avenue by which to attempt to understand what these specialists connected to the deity Iṣhara were doing. It must remain open whether the **munabbiātu* were necromancers proper, that is, diviners who received their information by interaction with the dead, or whether they fulfilled another function to do with Iṣhara's responsibilities. Because of the connection of the verb *nubbû* with the dead, it seems most likely that they were linked to the dead as well. It is clear, however, that the *munabbiātu* were not "witches," and

³⁸Daniel Arnaud, "La Syrie du moyen-Euphrate sous le protectorat hittite: contrats de droit privé," *AuOr* 5 (1987): 211–44. Durand ("Tombes," 88) suggests correcting the verb form from *ta-nab-bi-mi* (G-durative) to *tu-nab-bi-mi* (D-durative).

³⁹Joan Goodnick Westenholz, *Cuneiform Inscriptions in the Collection of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem: The Emar Tablets* (Cuneiform Monographs 13; Groningen: Styx, 2000), 9–12.

⁴⁰Daniel Arnaud, "Mariage et remariage des femmes chez les Syriens du moyen-Euphrate, à l'âge du bronze récent d'après deux nouveaux documents," *Sem* 46 (1996): 7–16.

⁴¹Gary M. Beckman, *Texts from the Vicinity of Emar in the Collection of Jonathan Rosen* (History of the Ancient Near East Monographs 2; Padua: Sargon, 1996), 39–40.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 49–51.

⁴³Doris Prechel, *Die Göttin Iṣhara: Ein Beitrag zur altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte* (ALASP 11; Münster: Ugarit, 1996).

therefore the negative connotations that are apparent in Mesopotamian texts (just as they are common to many Western societies) did not apply to them.⁴⁴

At this point we can return to the women of Ezekiel 13 and the question of how their behavior and social role should be understood. We do not know much about the behavior of female prophets elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible—or indeed that of male prophets—but it does not seem to include the “catching of souls” either for beneficial or for malevolent actions (whatever that expression refers to). It is true that using magic, and particularly black magic, is one of the more common accusations leveled against women throughout history, often without any indication that such magic was used. It may be the case that the women in Ezekiel 13 are therefore unjustly accused of magic. But if the description of their behavior is accurate—and for reasons that will become clear I think that it is—these women behave in ways that are different from those of prophets in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern sources.

Taking Ezekiel’s description of these women’s behavior seriously, Marjo Korpel has recently compared the language and imagery of bird catching and the depiction of the dead. Since the dead can be depicted throughout the ancient Near East with birdlike features such as feathers, she concludes that it is likely that the language of bird catching expresses the catching of dead souls and thus provides good reasons to understand the מתנבאות in Ezekiel 13 as interacting with the deceased.⁴⁵ Because of the link with the divining root נבא, it seems most likely that 13:17–21 was initially addressed to female necromancers.⁴⁶ The Emarite *munabbiātu and Hebrew מתנבאות should in all likelihood both be taken as refer-

⁴⁴For the negative reputation of “witches” in Mesopotamia, see, e.g., Sue Rollin, “Women and Witchcraft in Ancient Assyria (c. 900–600 BC),” in *Images of Women in Antiquity* (ed. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt; London: Croom Helm, 1993), 34–45; and more recently Daniel Schwemer, *Abwehrzauber und Behexung: Studien zum Schadenzauberglauben im alten Mesopotamien unter Benutzung von Tzvi Abuschs Kritischem Katalog und Sammlungen im Rahmen des Kooperationsprojektes Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-Witchcraft Rituals* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007).

⁴⁵Korpel, “Avian Spirits,” 102–9. She relies on Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (AOAT 219; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986), 161–96. However, contra Saggs (“External Souls”), I do not agree that the concept of an “external soul” already existed. Instead, large parts of the ancient Near East believed that there was a “land” where the dead existed and whence they could return to haunt the living. This means that there was a concept of some form of a continued existence, but it was corporeal and shadowy, rather than spiritual and offering a reward. Pohlmann (*Hesekiel 1–19*, 192) points toward the fact that the idiom לצוד נפש (“to hunt a soul”) is used only in this context and in Prov 6:26, where it describes a married woman as seducing a man’s “precious soul.” It is, further, curious that bread is mentioned as a price/gift, both in Ezek 13:19 and in Prov 6:26.

⁴⁶That necromancy was known in the West-Semitic world in general and in Israel in particular can be seen also in 1 Samuel 28. See Esther J. Hamori, “The Prophet and the Necromancer: Women’s Divination for Kings,” *JBL*, forthcoming.

ring not to prophets but to necromancers.⁴⁷ If this interpretation is correct, these women should not be understood as “witches,” at least not in the first instance. Nonetheless, I agree with Bowen that the structural similarities with *Maqlû* are intentional and that this structure is consciously used in order to denigrate the *מתנבאות* by comparing them to witches.

This interpretation of the *מתנבאות* and the **munabbiātu* as necromancers has implications for our understanding of the development of the Hebrew root *נבא* in general. I am not aware of a single eighth-century text that describes what a *נביא* does; we have no access to direct information that could decide this question. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, in their literary forms, the reports of technical and intuitive oracles can be virtually indistinguishable. It could well be that some of the great “prophets of old,” for example, Nathan, should more aptly be described as the great “technical diviners of old” who were “turned into” prophets in the proper sense when the meaning of the word changed.⁴⁸ Clearly, we end up with a situation in which *נביא* means “prophet.” Has it developed from a generic term of diviner to this rather more specific meaning? We cannot determine the meaning of the term in Israel’s early history with any certainty, but the evidence adduced here supports Alex P. Jassen’s view.⁴⁹

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have presented the two standard interpretations of the role of the “daughters of your people” in Ezekiel 13. I argued that both are deficient

⁴⁷In most ancient Near Eastern societies, technical diviners would have been of a higher social standing than prophets. Therefore, by recognizing the function that these women performed, we attribute a higher social standing to them. However, necromancy did not leave traces in Mesopotamia’s textual record, so we cannot know whether it was practiced and what the status of the specialists involved would have been.

⁴⁸That the faces of technical and intuitive divination changed over time has recently been reaffirmed, albeit not explicitly, by Alex P. Jassen, *Mediating the Divine: Prophecy and Revelation in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Second Temple Judaism* (STDJ 68; Leiden: Brill, 2007). Jassen shows that scriptural interpretation became the new “prophecy” at Qumran. This would form a true bridge between technical and intuitive divination, as both sets of abilities, charisma, and skill are required to perform this form of divination: training in scribal and interpretative skills and inspiration by the spirit. It is this form of prophecy that is intuitively familiar to many of us and that creates all the problems for distinguishing various kinds of divination in earlier periods. But before the advent of the scribal prophet-scholar-diviner, technical divination and intuitive divination were distinct, albeit very similar in appearance and identical in function.

⁴⁹See the preceding note. It is, of course, also possible that the noun *נביא* always had the meaning “prophet,” while the *hitpaal* participle retained the meaning “diviner,” or, more specifically, that the feminine participle retained the meaning “necromancer,” which is otherwise attested only in Emar, six hundred kilometers farther north and six hundred years earlier. This avenue, however, is dangerously close to the arguments refuted above that the *hitpaal* of *נבא* had a depreciative aspect that is absent in the *niphal*.

because they ultimately rely on the biblical model that prophecy is good and what is good must be prophecy. In particular, Korpel's reading of the pericope is vital for my interpretation of the meaning of מתנבאות in Ezekiel 13, but in her rhetoric she follows the traditional prejudice against diviners. My reading strategy of this pericope is therefore twofold. On the one hand, it is necessary to accept the result of recent studies on magic and religion showing that the two are not opposed to each other. As I have shown, by slightly adapting Nissinen's understanding of the relation between intuitive divination (prophecy) and technical divination, I can explain their connection to each other as part of a wider enterprise, while they still remain distinct forms of divine-human communication.

On the other hand, I have adduced the Emar texts, in which the term **munabbiātu* occurs. According to my preliminary interpretation, these texts refer not to female prophets but to necromancers. It is important to note here that both the Emar term **munabbiātu* and the Hebrew designation מתנבאות are isolated words and we should be cautious about drawing too many conclusions. However, the connection between the Emar occurrences and Ezekiel 13 is based not only on the fact that both are feminine plural participles in the D-stem/*hitpael*, but also on their social functions, which as far as we can tell appear in both cases to be linked to necromancy or caring for the dead in some way. This suggests that, while the more traditional exegetes are correct in stating that the women in Ezek 13:17–21 are not prophets, they are wrong in their negative evaluation of these women. To the contrary, in the societies of the ancient Near East, the status of the women as technical diviners would have been higher than if they had been prophets.⁵⁰ The authors of Ezekiel competed with other religious specialists for authority, and, as a direct competitor, Ezekiel did not portray the female diviners positively.⁵¹

Originally, the author of Ezekiel 13 condemned the מתנבאות for their form of divination. However, the picture drawn above changes radically once vv. 22–23 are added: they understand the root נבא as referring exclusively to prophecy, and with these verses the text accuses the מתנבאות of false prophecy. There can be no doubt

⁵⁰ As a by-product of this reading, we can now refute Hermann Spieckermann's theory that Neo-Assyrian influence caused there to be more women among the prophets (*Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* [FRLANT 129; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982], 296–303). For the apparent lack of female prophets, see now Jonathan Stökl, "Ištar's Women, YHWH's Men? A Curious Gender-Bias in Neo-Assyrian and Biblical Prophecy," *ZAW* 121 (2009): 87–100. See also the arguments against Stökl in Nissinen, "Gender and Prophetic Agency in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean," in *Prophets Male and Female: Gender and Prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Corinne L. Carvalho and Jonathan Stökl; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, forthcoming).

⁵¹ On female diviners and women who divine in the Hebrew Bible and beyond, see Esther J. Hamori, *Women's Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge* (Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming); and eadem, "Childless Female Diviners in the Bible and Beyond," in Carvalho and Stökl, *Prophets Male and Female*.

that the scribes and theologians who took that step considered the women to be prophets who were as guilty of falsifying divine messages as their male colleagues were. This, in turn, means that, as the text stands, it refers to female prophets. This view is corroborated by the inclusion of references to ch. 13 in 22:25, 28:

²⁵Her gang of prophets is like roaring lions in her midst, rending prey. They devour human beings; they seize treasure and wealth; they have widowed many women in her midst.

And again:

²⁸Her prophets, too, daub the wall for them with plaster: They prophesy falsely and divine deceitfully for them; they say, "Thus said the lord יהוה," when יהוה has not spoken.

Thus, the women who were initially necromancers, respected for their abilities to interact with the nonhuman sphere, are first accused of abusing their power and are then turned into "false prophets" who are accused of prophesying lies.⁵²

⁵²Interestingly, W. Robertson Smith suggested something similar already in 1885 in "On the Forms of Divination and Magic Enumerated in Deut. XVIII. 10, 11. Part I," *Journal of Philology* 13 (1885): 273–87.