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## RECOVERING FEMALE AUTHORS OF THE BIBLE

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The assumption that ancient scripture was primarily written by men and for men has been accepted by many and tested by few, especially as it concerns the Hebrew Bible. Most feminist critics, historical critics, and literary critics would agree with the statement by Danna Nolan Fewell that “the Bible, for the most part, is an alien text (to women), not written by women or with women in mind.”<sup>1</sup> Almost all biblical scholars can safely agree that male prophets, scribes, and poets wrote the majority of the books of the Hebrew Bible. However, there is that caveat: “for the most part.”

Although many sections of the Bible may seem alien to women, there is evidence that a few of these texts were actually composed by women. Surprisingly, literature on this theory is almost completely absent. There have been many articles and books published in the last few decades by both male and female feminist critics that reevaluate stories about women in the Bible and that analyze the tragic, violent, or flippant way that women are sometimes discussed in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> However, finding scholarly work discussing whether certain texts were actually composed or even written down initially by women is nearly impossible.

Proving that certain texts were actually written by women is impossible, but providing evidence that some texts *could* have been written by women is

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1. Danna Nolan Fewell, “Reading the Bible Ideologically: Feminist Criticism,” in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, eds. Stephen Haynes and Steven McKenzie (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 270.

2. Examples include stories like the concubine raped by Benjaminites, Tamar (both, for different reasons), and the many allegories in which Israel or Judah is compared to a wife who has prostituted herself out, after which YHWH decides to expose her to rape, beatings, and humiliation from “the nations.” This last category of biblical pericope has been the topic of much discussion. See Linda Day, “Rhetoric and Domestic Violence in Ezekiel 16,” *Biblical Interpreter* 8, no. 3 (2000): 205–30.

possible. Although no one can prove definitively who wrote the Bible, or even the genders of individual authors, it is worthwhile to question the assumption that all texts are masculine and to entertain the idea of a female author. Three texts that are not only about women, but which are also explicitly attributed to women in the text of the Bible, are the Song of Deborah,<sup>3</sup> the Song of the Mother of King Lemuel,<sup>4</sup> and Hannah's Prayer.<sup>5</sup> These texts all share a few similarities that could indicate a "feminine genre": the use of poetic verse, praise of deity, interest in women and women's concerns as their primary subject matter, and sympathy towards women's suffering in situations such as war and sexual violence. Considering the possibility that female authorship could exist in the Bible opens the field of feminist Biblical criticism to new possibilities and areas of study.

### Evidence of Female Authorship

How can scholars recognize when a biblical text has been written by a woman? Outside of the texts themselves, there is not much authentic literature about how the Bible was written and by whom. A narrative or song attributed to a certain person in the text or by tradition by no means makes the authorship certain—something biblical scholars know well.<sup>6</sup>

Most texts in the Hebrew Bible show a very negative view of the fairer sex by male biblical authors. Within texts like the Adam and Eve narrative, the story of the concubine raped and killed by the Benjaminites, and other "texts of terror"<sup>7</sup> for women, there are glimpses of women being blamed, raped, and killed. The male authors of these texts typically show little or no compassion. Women's feelings are considered much less than that of their male counterparts.<sup>8</sup> All of these texts lead us to the conclusion that women's voices were silenced and unwanted by this society.

However, other Hebrew Bible pericopes have a more positive view of women and the importance of listening to women's words. Chief among these is the account of Josiah and Huldah. When Josiah finds the "Book of the Law" in the temple, he asks his advisors (including Hilkiah the High Priest) to go

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3. "On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song." (Judg 5:1)

4. "The sayings of King Lemuel — a song with which his mother instructed him." (Prov 31:1)

5. "Then Hannah prayed and said . . ." (1 Sam 2:1)

6. Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harpercollins, 1987).

7. See Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

8. Compare David's concerns in the case of Tamar and Amnon.

and “inquire of YHWH.”<sup>9</sup> Oddly, instead of praying directly to YHWH (after all, the High Priest of YHWH is among them), they turn to the Prophetess Huldah in order to inquire of YHWH. Huldah is one of several women referred to in the Hebrew Bible as a prophetess.<sup>10</sup> The Deuteronomistic author of the text, as well as King Josiah, the High Priest Hilkiah, and three other important aristocratic men, obviously believed Huldah spoke for YHWH, and they not only sought out her counsel, but recorded it afterwards.<sup>11</sup> This pericope provides evidence that the words of “wise women” and prophetesses were sought out and recorded.

### Female Authorship in the Ancient Near East

In order to recognize markers of female authorship we may need to look outside of the Bible, at texts known to be authored by women anciently and in similar areas and cultures. Here, we will look at the poetry of Enheduanna, High Priestess of the moon god Nanna at Ur in Sumeria during the third millennium BCE.

Enheduanna was the daughter of the Akkadian King Sargon, and she was appointed by her father to be the En-Priestess of Ur as he conquered Mesopotamia. She is the first author in history of either sex whose name we know and whose works are attributed to her. She lived during a time of great cultural change in Sumeria, and she was instrumental in uniting the culturally diverse kingdom her father created. Archaeologist Leonard Wooley rediscovered Enheduanna in 1927 when he found an alabaster disk bearing her name and image in the Early Dynastic Level of the *giparu* at Ur.<sup>12</sup>

On this disk, which was originally found broken in several pieces and has been heavily reconstructed, we see Enheduanna in a flounced dress and a traditional Sumerian rolled-brim cap, though the cap is a restoration and what her original headdress looked like is unclear. She is flanked by three people, all of which are likely male temple attendants, and the man in front of Enheduanna

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9. 2 Kgs 22:13. For Hebrew Bible translations, I use the New International Version with a few of my own variations—for example, I always substitute “the LORD” for “YHWH”. This will make more sense in the context of the poetry of Enheduanna, who was praising a single Goddess with a name, as Hannah was praising her named God.

10. Others are Miriam, Deborah, Isaiah’s wife, Noadiah, and a few false prophetesses (Ezek 13:17).

11. 2 Kgs 22.

12. Irene Winter, “Women in Public: The Disk of Enheduanna, The Beginning of the Office of En-Priestess, and the Weight of Visual Evidence,” *RAI* 33 (1987): 195.

is making an offering on an altar before a Ziggurat.<sup>13</sup> On the reverse of the disk is the name Enheduanna, “true lady of Nanna, wife of Nanna.”<sup>14</sup>



Limestone Disk of Enheduanna, University of Pennsylvania Museum

Since this discovery, several Babylonian clay tablets have been found bearing copies of poems attributed to Enheduanna. Her known anthology consists of three long poems to Inanna, three poems to Nanna, and forty-two temple hymns celebrating each of the several temples throughout Sargon’s kingdom. Because of these discoveries and others,<sup>15</sup> scholars now have access to a wealth of female literature from the ancient Near East. We know that at least noblewomen in Mesopotamia could have been educated, literate, and artistically expressive, composing poetry within only a few hundred years of the invention of writing. Despite the very patriarchal society of her time, Enheduanna was well known, well read, well respected, and a talented poet. She was a religious leader in her community, whom men respected and followed,<sup>16</sup> very

13. The restoration of this Ziggurat is debated and considered improper by some. Winter, “Women in Public,” 68.

14. Betty De Shong Meador, *Inanna, Lady of Largest Heart: Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 41.

15. Some other examples of female authorship in the ancient Near East are the account written on two paving stones in Harran by Adad-guppi (Marc Van de Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East* [Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2007], 279) and the Wadi Daliyeh papyri, which contain legal texts written by the Samaritan woman, Babatha (Eric M. Meyers and Sean Burt, “Exile and Return: From the Babylonian Destruction to the Beginnings of Hellenism,” in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks [Washington DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2011], 234–35).

16. Although archaeologists have not discovered any texts mentioning Enheduanna outside of her own poems and the inscription on the Enheduanna Disk, a careful reading of her own work describes how she was able to function in a masculine way in a patriarchal society—to the point where she is told by a man to castrate herself (Meador, *Inanna*, 177).

similar to the description we have of Deborah in Judges 4.<sup>17</sup> The very existence of Enheduanna and her writings is evidence that female authorship was not only possible, but plausible in Israel. However, a stronger argument is made by comparing Enheduanna's poetry with female-attributed texts in the Hebrew Bible.

### Hannah's Prayer and Lady of Largest Heart

The poem "In-nin-sa-gur-ra," or "Lady of Largest Heart," is a collection of praise hymns to Inanna following a long period of suffering by Enheduanna.<sup>18</sup> In this poem, Enheduanna attempts to convince Inanna to ease her suffering by praising Inanna's many wonderful qualities and testifying of how faithful she is in worshipping her goddess.

Lady of Largest Heart  
Keen-for-battle Queen  
Joy of the Annuna

Eldest daughter of the Moon  
In all lands supreme  
Tower among great rulers

...  
Who dares defy her  
Queen of lifted head  
She is greater than the mountain<sup>19</sup>

The first few lines of this poem praise Inanna and establish her as the greatest among all gods and kings alike. This introduction of praise and veneration is echoed in Hannah's Prayer:

17. In the introduction to Judges 4, Deborah is described using typically masculine phraseology: "leading Israel at that time," deciding disputes, acting as a judge in the Ephraimite hill country, and ultimately leading an army into battle.

18. The cause of this pain is never expressed, although the effects are explained clearly: "my Lady/what day will you have mercy/how long will I cry a moaning prayer/I am yours/why do you slay me?" (Meador, *Lady of Largest Heart*, 134.)

19. For translations of Enheduanna's poetry, I used Betty De Shong Meador's translations in *Inanna, Lady of Largest Heart: Poems of the Sumerian High Priestess Enheduanna* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). Although Meador is not a Sumerian scholar, she worked closely with several, such as Daniel Foxvog, while creating these translations. I have found her volume to be the most complete translation of Enheduanna's poems to Inanna.

My heart rejoices in YHWH  
 In YHWH my horn is lifted high  
 ...  
 There is no one holy like YHWH  
 There is no one besides you  
 There is no rock like our God<sup>20</sup>

Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 is a short but profound poem attributed to Hannah. This poem appears, according to the text, to have been sung by Hannah in the courtyard of the Temple in Shiloh after she weaned her son, Samuel, whom she had promised to YHWH in a previous year. The impetus for Hannah's promise with YHWH came from the continual provocation by "her rival," Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah. According to the account in 1 Samuel 1:6–8, Peninnah regularly drove Hannah to tears by ridiculing her for her barrenness. This prayer is a song of triumph, praising YHWH who has the power to make "the barren [bear] seven" and cause "she that hath many children [to] wax feeble." Hannah pined for a child for years, and after being blessed with a child, placed him into the service of YHWH as promised. In this prayer, she continues her praise of YHWH for taking away her "shame."

The underlying theme of this text, jealousy between two women brought about by difficulty in conceiving, is exclusively feminine.<sup>21</sup> In the Bible, barrenness is never attributed to men, but is attributed to women many times.<sup>22</sup> In ancient Near Eastern contexts, childlessness is almost always considered a defect in a wife, and not in a husband.<sup>23</sup> Because of this, it was very shameful for ancient women to not bear children, especially when another of her husband's wives was bearing children.<sup>24</sup> This song is then mainly about the triumph over shame that Hannah experienced after the birth of her son; shame that was placed on her because of the expectations of her culture. In both this prayer and in "Lady of the Largest Heart," these poets praise the power of their deity to bring shame on their enemies and bring ruin on the strong.

20. 1 Sam 2:1–2.

21. Or, at least, it was exclusively feminine in this cultural context. Today, with our better understanding of how conception works, we know that men can just as easily be the cause of barrenness, and it is entirely possible for jealousy to arise between two men because one is fertile and the other is not.

22. John Byron, "Infertility and the Bible 2: The Defective Wife," *The Biblical World: Dedicated to the Study of All Things Biblical* (blog), 26 Jan 2011, <http://thebiblicalworld.blogspot.com/2011/01/childlessness-and-bible-2-defective.html?m=1>.

23. Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East*, OtSt 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 176.

24. Similar situations arise in other biblical passages, such as the fallout between Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16:4–6) and Rachel and Leah (Gen 30:1–2).

The one who disobeys	Do not keep talking so proudly
She does chase, twist	Or let your mouth speak such arrogance
afflict with jumbled eyes	For YHWH is a God who knows
...	And by him deeds are weighed <sup>26</sup>
Greatest of the great rulers	...
A pit trap for the headstrong	For the foundations of the earth are
a rope snare for the evil	YHWH's
...	On them he has set the world
What she has crushed to powder	He will guard the feet of his faithful
Never will rise up	servants
The scent of fear stains her robe	But the wicked will be silenced in the
She wears	place of darkness
The carved-out ground plan	Because it is not by strength that a man
Of Heaven and Earth	prevails
...	
Inanna	
You draw men into unending strife	Those who oppose YHWH will be
Or crown with fame	broken
A favored person's life <sup>25</sup>	The Most High will thunder from
	heaven
	YHWH will judge the ends of the earth.
	He will give strength to his king
	and exalt the horn of his anointed <sup>27</sup>

Especially striking is the explicit assertion, in both texts, that the deity has control over heaven and earth. Enheduanna writes that Inanna wears upon her “the carved-out ground plan of heaven and earth,” while Hannah remarks that “the foundations of the earth are YHWH’s.” Here we see two very similar compositions: both glorify each woman’s deity, both extoll YHWH and Inanna’s role in architecturally creating and shaping the earth,<sup>28</sup> and both rejoice in

25. Meador, *Inanna*, 117–36.

26. 1 Sam 2:3.

27. 1 Sam 2:8b–10.

28. It is interesting to note that in the etiological narrative of Mesopotamia, Inanna was not actually the deity that created and shaped the earth, rather it was Apsu and Tiamat. Enheduanna, through her poetry, raises Inanna to a position among the Mesopotamian Pantheon that she had not hitherto enjoyed, that of ruler over all other gods. This was a theology that persisted for the next few hundred years in Mesopotamia. See Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).



their respective deity's power to destroy enemies and the wicked. Keeping in mind that worship is not an exclusively male experience, but is a shared experience between both genders, these similarities could point to a "woman's genre" in the ancient Near East. There are masculine texts laid out in a similar manner, which could indicate instead a more general pattern of praise hymn utilized by both male and female authors. However, the emphasis on female characters and experiences in the texts discussed here mark them as feminine rather than masculine.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Song of Deborah and the Exaltation of Inanna**

Another of Enheduanna's long poems to Inanna is *Nin-me-šar-ra*, or "The Exaltation of Inanna." This piece, unlike the majority of Enheduanna's earlier works, is not simply a hymn of praise to her goddess, but an autobiographical story of the time when Enheduanna was driven away from her post as En-Priestess of Ur by Lugalanne, a man who took part in the rebellion in Ur against Naram-Sin (Enheduanna's nephew). In this poem, Enheduanna describes all of the pain and humiliation this man has brought upon her and pleads with Inanna to open her heart to her again and help her. By the end of the poem, Enheduanna is reinstated as En-Priestess of Nanna.

Truly for your gain  
 You drew me toward  
 My holy quarters  
 I, the High Priestess  
 I, Enheduanna  
 There I raised the ritual basket  
 There I sang the shout of joy<sup>30</sup>

This poem shares a few similarities with the Song of Deborah, a mix of praise and storytelling in the genre of a poem told in the first person. In 1936, W. F. Albright made the claim that "Nearly all competent biblical scholars believe that the Song (of Deborah) is the oldest document which the Bible has

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29. To clarify, I am only arguing that the poetic Prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 could have been written by a woman, not the narrative surrounding the poem. Although this narrative draws on the same feminine themes as the poem, it seems more likely that the author of the greater Samuel narrative wrote it. The author may have used Hannah's account as a primary source, while the poem itself seems to be a direct quote.

30. Meador, *Inanna*, 174.

preserved in approximately its original form.”<sup>31</sup> This passage begins with the phrase, “And Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on this day.”<sup>32</sup> Here we have a clear attribution to a woman as the composer and singer of this song, although it is doubled with an attribution to a man. It is difficult to tell which verses can be safely attributed to Deborah. Verses 6–9 can confidently be attributed to her because she refers to herself in the first person: “Villagers in Israel would not fight, they held back until I, Deborah, arose, I arose a mother in Israel.”<sup>33</sup> With an attribution and a first-person reference to a female author, it is obvious that, at least traditionally, this text was considered to be composed in part by a female author.

A striking similarity between these two song-stories is displayed in the following passages:

The Woman will dash his fate  
That Lugalanne  
The mountains, the biggest floods  
Lie at Her feet

The Woman is as great as he  
She will break the city from him<sup>34</sup>

Most blessed of women be Jael  
the wife of Heber the Kenite  
most blessed of tent-dwelling women  
...  
Her hand reached for the tent peg  
Her right hand for the workman’s  
hammer  
She struck Sisera, she crushed his head  
She shattered and pierced his temple  
At her feet he sank, he fell; there he  
lay<sup>35</sup>

In both of these works, the poet emphasizes the fact that woman ultimately triumphs over man, and that women are just as capable as men at winning battles and carrying out the work of their deity. This is an aspect that is hardly, if ever, found in literature written by men, especially in the ancient Near East. It is also one of the most compelling reasons to attribute the Song to a woman.

The Song of Deborah and The Exaltation of Inanna are both beautiful, long poems that glorify the poets’ deities, but that also dwell on human women in the story. Deborah herself is a major figure in the Song, who rose up and

31. W.F. Albright, “The Song of Deborah in the Light of Archaeology,” *BASOR* 62 (1936): 26–31.

32. Judg 5:1.

33. Judg 5:7.

34. Meador, *Inanna*, 175.

35. Judg 5:24, 26–27.

led the tribes of Israel into battle against her enemies. Jael is the ultimate victor in the battle.<sup>36</sup> The fact that these traditionally masculine roles of leader and victor in war are given to women could be another indication that the Song of Deborah was actually composed by a woman. Female characters in masculine-attributed texts of the Bible are generally treated as the victims of violence rather than the instigators, or are resigned to the position of mother or wife and their actions are not expounded upon outside of those roles.<sup>37</sup>

In the Exaltation of Inanna as well, the poet remarks on her own role in carrying out the work of Inanna:

I have heaped up coals in the brazier  
 I have washed in the sacred basin  
 I have readied your room  
 in the tavern  
 (may your heart be cooled for me)  
 Suffering bitter pangs  
 I gave birth to this exaltation  
 For you my Queen<sup>38</sup>

Enheduanna describes here her role in actually giving birth to Inanna's exaltation. This seems to be a reference to her religious innovations in Ur, which exalted Inanna to a position above all other gods in the Mesopotamian Pantheon, even exalting her above Nanna whom Enheduanna explicitly served.<sup>39</sup> This account parallels the accounts of Deborah and Jael, in which women are used to exalt YHWH as the fulfillment of prophecies.<sup>40</sup>

However, not only are stories of "righteous" women allied with Israel given a place in this poem; the very end of the Song of Deborah reflects on the usual situation of women when their men go to war.

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36. Jael is also "masculinized" in this pericope by the inversion of the traditionally female roles of lover, mother, and rape victim. The scene of Sisera fleeing to Jael's tent is ironically full of sexual and maternal imagery. The repeated action of Jael "covering" Sisera (ותכסהו) is suggestive of a sexual encounter. There is also maternal imagery in the action of covering him with a blanket and bringing him milk. All of these roles are reversed with Jael's betrayal.

37. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

38. Meador, *Inanna*, 179.

39. This is referred to earlier in the poem, when Enheduanna writes, "I shall not/pay tribute to Nanna/it is of you/I proclaim" (Meador, *Inanna*, 178).

40. "YHWH will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman." (Judg 4:9)

Through the window peered Siser's mother  
 Behind the lattice she cried out  
 "Why is his chariot so long in coming?  
 Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?"<sup>41</sup>

The situation described here is a caricature of the "woman at the window" motif.<sup>42</sup> The use of this image appears to be meant to appeal especially to other women, mothers, wives, and daughters, who have been in that position before. However, the initial attempt of the author to invoke sorrow for this bereaved mother on the part of the reader is dramatically reversed with the following verses.

The wisest of her ladies answer her  
 Indeed, she keeps saying to herself  
 "Are they not finding and dividing the spoils?  
 A womb or two for each man  
 Colorful garments as plunder for Sisera  
 Colorful garments embroidered  
 Highly embroidered garments for my neck  
 All this as plunder?"  
 So may all your enemies perish, YHWH!<sup>43</sup>

The mothers and wives of Israel's enemies stand gleefully contemplating the rape of Israelite women by their sons, and the plunder that they will bring back to them. Once again, this condemnation of the formerly pitiable mother of Sisera is especially effective when used before a female audience, who were more likely to become rape victims than men in this context because of accepted war practices.<sup>44</sup> In fact, some believe that the repeated sexual language in the Jael/Sisera section of the poem may be an allusion to a rape of Jael by Sisera, although her invitation for him to enter the tent makes this less likely. However, even this traditional view of women as easy victims of rape is turned on its head as Jael drives the tent peg into Sisera's mouth and then the ground.<sup>45</sup>

41. Judg 5:28.

42. D. N. Pienaar, "Symbolism in the Samaria Ivories and Architecture," *AcT* 2 (2008): 48–68.

43. Judg 5:29–31.

44. Susan Brooks Thistlewaite, "You May Enjoy the Spoil of Your Enemies: Rape as a Biblical Metaphor for War," *Semeia* 61 (1993): 59–75.

45. Fewell and Gunn argue that the word usually translated as "his temple/side of his head" (רִקְחוֹ) should instead be translated as mouth because of the other uses of the word in Psalms and Song of Solomon. "In Songs, both the sequence of description and the (sexually

This transforms the woman, who would predictably be the rape victim in this scenario, into a figurative rapist.

This sheds light on a possible reason for Jael's actions: she was married to a man who had allied himself with the losing side of the war. As a civilian who lived in the war zone, she knew what was coming her way. By killing Sisera and presenting his body to Barak, she became a hero instead of a victim in the aftermath of this battle. Similar to the characters of Deborah and Eheduanna, Jael takes charge of her own position in society, rather than having her actions dictated by men. This account of Jael has inverted every patriarchal notion of women; it is truly unique within the biblical cannon. All of these factors combine to suggest that this song was in fact composed by a woman. If not Deborah herself, then perhaps a contemporary woman or a woman who lived shortly after her time.

Another text in the Hebrew Bible that is both about women and attributed to a woman is the well-quoted passage in Proverbs 31 on the qualities of a virtuous woman. This passage has historically been interpreted as a man's idealized notion of what a good wife should be, and it may be just that.<sup>46</sup> However, the introduction of this poem offers us another option: what if this is actually a *woman's* idealized notion of what a good wife should be?

The sayings of King Lemuel – a song with which his  
mother instructed him:

“Listen, my son! Listen, son of my womb!  
Listen, my son, the answer to my prayers!”<sup>47</sup>

The attribution of this saying is a bit confusing; is King Lemuel the composer, or his mother? However, the first stanza of the poem makes it clear who is speaking: it is told from the first-person perspective of Lemuel's mother. From the text, it seems that this song could either be an exact transcription of a song sung by King Lemuel's mother, or King Lemuel's rendition of the song, in which case it could have been heavily edited and changed to the point where the poem was no longer truly the composition of a woman.

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charged) comparison to a 'split pomegranate' strongly suggest 'mouth' rather than 'temple.'" (Danna Nolan Fewell and D.M. Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4 and 5," *JAAR* 58:3 [1990]: 389–411.)

46. Johann Christian Konrad von Hofmann, *Schriftbeweis* (Nördlingen: C. H. Bed'schen, 1960), 404.

47. Prov 31:1–2. This translation is my own.

In this song, Lemuel's mother offers him advice and chastisement. She advises him to not "spend [his] strength on women,"<sup>48</sup> to avoid beer and becoming drunk, to speak up for the destitute, and in general to be a good, righteous, and fair judge and king. Following this, there is an abrupt shift to the discussion of a virtuous woman; so abrupt, in fact, that most scholars think that Proverbs 31:1–9 is a separate text entirely from Proverbs 31:10–31.<sup>49</sup> The recipient of this song, King Lemuel, is only mentioned in this proverb, and is otherwise unknown in the Bible or extrabiblical Jewish literature. There are several theories about who Lemuel was. According to rabbinic tradition, Lemuel was another name for Solomon, which would make the composer of this proverb Bathsheba.<sup>50</sup> However, this tradition was most likely an attempt to conform to the idea that Solomon is the author of the Book of Proverbs.<sup>51</sup>

This song is different in many ways from the previous feminine texts we have surveyed thus far. There is almost nothing theological about it. It is not written as a praise of YHWH or another god, but is rather a song of advice from a mother to her son. However, it does maintain a few of the genre characteristics described thus far. Namely, it is in verse form rather than prose, it is told from a first-person perspective, and it specifically discusses women. The secular, human material is also different from Enheduanna's texts. Despite the difference in genre, its feminine attribution makes it possible that verses 1–9, or perhaps even the whole proverb, were written by a woman.

### Markers of a Feminine Genre

From the examples listed above—and assuming that most biblical texts attributed to women in the Bible actually were composed by women—we can see a few defining features of this genre:

1. Women always used poetic verse when writing; this could have been either written or sung from memory.
2. Their poetry usually consisted of praise to YHWH, although secular ideas may be addressed instead.

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48. Prov 31:3.

49. Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985).

50. Moncure Daniel Conway, *Solomon and Solomonic Literature* (Charleston: BiblioBazaar, 2008), 67.

51. For some interesting insights on the discussion of the feminine, and especially the female "Wisdom" in Proverbs, see Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) and *Wise, Strange, and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

3. These compositions usually included women and women's concerns as their subject matter, such as a woman's place in society, pregnancy and barrenness, rape, children, and marriage.
4. The tone of the poetry is usually sympathetic towards the plight of women.

There may never be a way to definitively prove who the authors of individual biblical texts really were. Even the authorship of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible or the Epistles of the New Testament, all attributed to certain men, are disputed in scholarly circles. It is a popular thing to discuss the Deuteronomist, Proto-Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah, etc., and stay away from suggesting that any book of the Bible was actually written by who it says it was written by. However, in many of these arguments, an alternative author is not suggested; it is simply fashionable to question everything the Bible claims. This seems to be the case with feminine texts as well. We tend to shy away from attributing anything directly to Deborah, Hannah, Bathsheba, etc., even though—as is the case with the Song of Deborah—the text seems relatively unchanged and dates back to the period in which the historical events were claimed to have happened. I am not suggesting that scholars begin to exercise a hermeneutic of faith. However, an extreme hermeneutic of suspicion is just as subjective in most situations. Unless there is another explanation that makes better sense, to me it seems natural to assume that certain biblical texts were indeed written by the person to whom they are attributed. This holds true for texts attributed to women. There is much stronger evidence for female literacy in the ancient Near East than many think, and it is a disservice to everyone to assume, in the face of all this evidence, that there is no female composition in the Bible. These feminine texts help women relate to the Bible in a way that other texts do not allow, and they give us an intimate glimpse into the lives, feelings, and art of ancient Israelite women.