

Huldah; Inspiration of the Old testament

Who are you Huldah, I hear you ask? I am Huldah, wife of Shallum, son of Tikyah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. [2Kings22: 14 (NRSV) Very little is known about me, for I am merely a lowly woman of Israel, and only the third female prophet Israel has known, with Miriam and Deborah, the two before me. 'Miriam called prophet because of her ecstatic dance and song, her charisma; and Deborah, widely respected because of her military prowess and counsel,'¹ Me, I, simply listen deeply to my God and pass on the wisdom shared with me to those who need to hear.

In my hidden life, my husband and I have been married now for many years. He married me knowing that I was gifted with the eye of a prophet, favourable in the sight of Yahweh. He does not understand my gift, or why I am favoured in Yahweh's sight, but he respects me and the work I am called to do.

Why is there so little known about you? I am a woman of Ancient Israel, one of the unimportant, forgotten ones, and I have my normal daily chores to attend. I live in the second quarter of Jerusalem, a very ordinary community of very ordinary people. I gather, as is the custom, each day with the women of the city as we collect our water for the cooking and washing, and trade for goods from the market place. We exchange stories of our husbands, families, relatives, kin and friends. I listen carefully. Many strangers pass through our city on their journeys to battle and merchant business, and I listen intently to their stories too. In the quieter times of my day I spend time listening to the voice of Yahweh and interpreting the stories and events that I hear about, in the light of what Yahweh reveals to me. My reputation as a woman true to the voice of Yahweh has spread throughout the land. The great kings and leaders send convoys to me for advice. I am not afraid to speak the truth, for I know that Yahweh is my guide.

Josiah, king of Judah, I had heard down by the well, was given an old book of the law that distressed him. The gossip said that he had rent his garments because he was deeply saddened and angry that the ancestors and people of Judah had failed to live up to this wondrous book. He ordered his priest and servants to, "Inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us." [2Kings22: 13]

The people wondered whom they would turn to for advice. Many supposed that it would be one of the many male prophets they would seek, perhaps Jeremiah, or Zephaniah². The word of the law was so frightening, and it needed to be interpreted with much care. However, Yahweh revealed to me in a dream

¹ Nunnally-Cox, Janice, Foremothers: Women of the Bible. The Seabury Press, 1981, New York. Pge 93

² . A number of scholars agree that these two male prophets would have been active at this time.

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that it would be me to give the authority of this book. I said nothing, but simply smiled to myself, confident that Yahweh's word was deep within my heart.

Therefore, it happened not long after the gossip was shared by the well, that the priest Hilkiah, and the servants of the king, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan and Asiah, came to me. The people of my town were amazed by the spectacle of this richly adorned group as they came to my simple house.³ Word spread around the town and a great throng gathered around.

Humbled and afraid, they sought my advice. I invited them into the privacy of my kitchen, crowded now by such a group. Undaunted by their presence, I invited them to show me the book that they had found. Hilkiah unwrapped it carefully from its swaddling and laid it in my lap. I read the words slowly and deliberately. I closed my eyes and prayed. Humbled by the power of Yahweh within me I spoke in the language of the prophet⁴, without fear or terror, I spoke true, telling them what I knew that Yahweh wished for them to take to their king. They trusted me without question. My words they knew were from Yahweh.⁵ Who could speak such a horrifying truth, unafraid of the consequences, if not inspired by the creator God him/herself?

Hilkiah and the others quickly left my home, eager to return to their king. Some time later, my husband, who was known for taking water down to the city gates for passing travellers⁶, brought the news back to me that Josiah had been so impressed with the prophecy I sent back to him, that he was calling all the priests, prophets, elders and people of Judah together. He wished to renew the covenant to the Lord in a way that was strong and uncompromising.

³ . Swidler, Leonard; Biblical Affirmations of Woman, Westminster Press, 1979, Philadelphia, pge. 88. "The extraordinary thing from one point of view is that they went to a woman prophet! It is extraordinary in view of the long-standing deep hostility between the devotees of Yahweh and the devotees of the Goddess, whether under the name of Asherah, Astarte or Anath... On the other hand, perhaps because Goddess worship was so pervasive and the prominent religious role of women naturally played it so customary, the obvious presumption that Josiah, Hilkiah and the other Yahwehists clearly held about a woman being able to be the deity's, even Yahweh's spokesperson was not surprising."

⁴ . Camp, Claudia V., "1 and 2 Kings", in Newsom, C.A. & Ringe, S.H. [Editors], The Women's Bible Commentary, SPCK, 1992, London, Pge 109. Camp continues along the line of the latter part of Swiddlers argument. She says, "It appears [in Ancient Israel], however, that prophecy was one religious vocation open to women on an equal basis with men. Certainly the narrator of Kings takes no notice whatsoever of Huldah's gender."

⁵ Brown, Cheryl Anne; No Longer Be Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women; Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, Louisville, Kentucky. Pge 77. brown would certainly not agree entirely with Camp on this point of the acceptability of women as prophets, for she points out that, "In the continuation of Jewish Antiquities, Huldah delivers an extended prophecy to the King, with Josephus uncharacteristically adding no negative commentary about women."

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Shallum and I attended on the appointed day. I stood tall and proud, though awed by the power of Yahweh within me. On my word, Josiah had accepted the book as the true and only book of the law. The first book to be accepted as the 'word of Yahweh', given authority by me, a simple woman. On my word, he was committing his reign to absolute integrity and obedience to the will of Yahweh, confident that his life would be peaceful if he could turn the hearts of his people back to the commands of Yahweh.

Shallum and I returned to our life in the second quarter of the town of Jerusalem, and I continued to pray and listen to the voice of Yahweh and speak Yahweh's commands to those who needed to hear. My greatest disciples were the women of the town who treasured my words deep in their own hearts and passed them on to their daughters and their daughters, daughters; right through the generations. The men also heard the words I spoke from Yahweh. How could they not, when the women were so inspired and inflamed by this love? But it was the women who were the faithful ones!

I watched Josiah over the years and prayed for him in his earnest [and sometimes ferocious] repentance for the people and ancestors of Judah. 'Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, and with his might, according to all the Law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.' [2 Kings 23:25] Part of me did weep as I watched him in his zeal rid our land of everything that was of feminine origin. The weaving groups for Asherah? Could they have not become weaving groups for Yahweh? I wonder with some wistfulness if it is wise to rid the land of everything we do not understand?! Nevertheless, Josiah is a reformist and reformists do not always stop and ponder. However, he was a good man, intent to keep his promise, and for this Yahweh did reward him by keeping the promise to Josiah, that I uttered those many years ago. Josiah died at peace, with Yahweh keeping from him the disaster that would later befall our land.

Why did we not hear from you again Huldah? Because my dear, the women had no say after me in the book of the Lord. Perhaps the men were afraid to listen to their wives, mothers, daughters after me. Perhaps my deep listening and uncompromising passing on of Yahweh's word was too frightening for them! Perhaps if they had listened again, more reforms, greater than those of Josiah would have been called to commence. But we women know that wisdom is there for us, it is part of us, sometimes just a whisper, sometimes loud and strident. "The wise voice that is born is the one, worn and soaring, that sings

⁶ Swidler, Arlene, "In Search of Huldah", The Bible Today, November 1978, Pge 1784

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in chords of our brokenness and our wholeness; it sings of the whole and compassionate being.”⁷ Perhaps then, my dear my voice was never heard again in such an official way, but it certainly has been heard, even if only because of its seeming absence, and will continue to haunt at the edge, never silenced completely!

References

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⁷ Brock, Rita Nakashima, “Dusting the Bible on the Floor: A Hermeneutics of Wisdom.” In Searching the Scriptures; A Feminist Introduction. Edited by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Collins Dove, 1993, Blackburn, Victoria, Pge 73.

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Huldah has had a special fascination for Kim throughout her studies, because not only was she a woman, but also she was the first person to declare a book of the bible as 'Word of God'.