



Women Prophets of Scripture III: Huldah – Prophet and Canonical Authority

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 15, 2024

2 Kings 22, Mark 8:27-38

I hope you have been enjoying our encounters with women prophets of scripture as much as I have. They are all formidable individuals recognized by their peers as speaking for God. Each had a significant impact on the story of salvation, Yet they have mostly languished in obscurity along the along the hallways of history. So we are doing our part here to bring them out from the shadows.

Two weeks ago we had Miriam, exuberant if flawed by sin as we all are, who affirmed God's victory over the Egyptians. Last week we got to know the fiery Deborah, who engineered the people's long-awaited conquest of Canaan.

Today we meet Huldah. Who has heard of Huldah? Or who has known a Huldah, given that Old Testament names are popular? It is the 14,000th most popular name for girls at the moment. So maybe it's time to recover her legacy and place in history.

We find Huldah in 2 Kings 22 and also in 2 Chronicles 34, where the same account is repeated.

The time was around 630 BC. The young king Josiah, a righteous man, had ordered major repairs to begin on the temple. As things were being brought out, under the rubble the high priest Hilkiah has made a surprising discovery – a scroll containing the book of the law, presumably an early form of Deuteronomy, which had lain in obscurity for decades. Neither its existence nor its contents were known to the people of the time.

Hilkiah gave the scroll to the king's secretary, who proceeded to read it to Josiah. The king was stunned by what he heard -- an entire set of laws for how the people were to be living given to Moses by God, that they knew nothing about. Being a God-fearing man, Josiah is deeply distressed to think that such a critical document has been overlooked for so long. He tears his clothes as a sign of remorse. What will God's response be to the people's sins of neglect and disobedience? Will he condemn them and bring disaster?

Knowing that something must be done, King Josiah commissions a high-ranking delegation to take the scroll and consult with someone who can tell them what God intends to do. He gives them marching orders: "Go and ask the Lord on my behalf, and on behalf of the people, and on behalf of all Judah concerning the contents of this scroll that has been found."

This is not a small matter. The king is asking for the Lord's guidance for the sake of his nation. If God judges them harshly, disaster will follow. We see how important this mission was by who he commissioned. The party consisted of the High Priest, the father of the future governor, the son of a prophet, the secretary of state, and the king's own officer.

So off they go with the scroll in hand, undoubtedly full of apprehension. And who did they seek out without hesitation? Huldah.

2 Kings describes her rather demurely as a prophet and daughter-in-law of the keeper of the wardrobe, but the size and prestige of the delegation tells us about not only the seriousness of the situation but that she was well known and respected by the king and his advisers.

When the delegation presents the situation and scroll to Huldah, she responds brilliantly. First, she makes clear she is speaking for God and that they, when they deliver her prophecy to Josiah, are also speaking for God. Second, in her judgment she quotes from the scroll itself – Deuteronomy 29, to be specific. Let's hear what she says, and then consider why **WHAT** she says had such an impact on the future of worship – then as now.

It first sounds like bad news.

“This is what the Lord says: I am about to bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants, fulfilling all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read, **17** because they have abandoned me and burned incense to other gods in order to anger me with all the work of their hands. My wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched.”

Imagine the delegation beginning to quake in terror at having to deliver such a judgment to the king. But Huldah continues:

Say this to the king of Judah who sent you to inquire of the Lord: ‘This is what the Lord God of Israel says: As for the words that you heard, because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I spoke against this place and against its inhabitants, that they would become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I myself have heard’—this is the Lord’s declaration. ‘Therefore, I will indeed gather you to your ancestors, and you will be gathered to your grave in peace.- Your eyes will not see all the disaster that I am bringing on this place.’”

Now instead of shaking in terror, they are probably weeping for joy. Josiah’s expression of remorse has saved them and their nation.

But there is more. In quoting from Deuteronomy in her prophecy, Huldah authorized that this scroll **WAS** God's word. In this way she has been heralded as authorizing “the first document that would become the core of scripture for Judaism and Christianity.” Because of Huldah, the canon of Scripture that went on to be codified as the Holy Bible came into being.

This is huge. **A prophet who was a woman authorized the beginning of the biblical canon.** “Go, Huldah!”

This is a matter of the historical record. But what’s in it for us today? Consider the crisis God’s people found themselves in when the king learned of the lost scroll. When it became apparent that the all-important book of the law had been neglected for so long, blame and accusations could have gone flying. Who was responsible for this? Who misplaced it? The tongue, which as James tells us today “a restless evil, full of deadly poison,” could have been unleashed. Instead the king showed remorse over the people’s ignorance.

And Huldah boldly spoke the truth even in a difficult situation, just as Jesus does in Mark 8 when he tells the disciples what they do not want to hear about his coming suffering and death. Not even Peter’s desperate rebuke alters the truth Jesus knows he must tell. In the same way, Huldah honestly conveyed God’s response to the people having abandoned God. She doesn’t sugar-coat God’s anger. Only after making this clear does she pronounce the Lord’s forgiveness.

In this way Huldah was a truth-teller, speaking God's message clearly and without any personal inflection. She tells us: First of all, know the whole truth – not only what you find it convenient to know. Then, do not hold back what you know to be true. Speak the truth, even if it may not be what others want to hear.

This is the legacy of the cross in our context, the cross that we honored yesterday on Holy Cross Day and which we hear about today in Mark 8. Jesus was telling his followers that to save their lives, meaning to know life in him they had to be willing to face the truth of what was going to happen to him. "The Son of Man MUST undergo great suffering and be rejected and killed and after three days rise again."

But the disciples stopped listening after "killed." They couldn't handle it. We must be able to, because – as theologian Douglas John Hall has written -- the crucified God is the defining revelation of God AND of the human condition. God's own Son was given to us in a great reversal of expectation – the all-powerful, omnipotent God comes to us in weakness, in a crucified body hanging on the cross, cast aside and condemned.

And then – raised after three days. Only when we are willing to speak the whole truth of this reality, that God comes to us in weakness so that we may be raised with him as fully authentic and alive, will this God become our God.

So take it from Huldah. We must speak the whole truth, not only that part which is comfortable or convenient. Huldah could have simply pronounced God's forgiveness and sent everyone away not having had an anxious moment. But that was not the whole truth. God was angry, and she let them know it.

When we speak only partial truth, we keep ourselves from seeing the fullness of the crucified God. As Paul says, God's power is made perfect in weakness, and it is this mind-bending truth of our faith, revealed through the cross that Jesus calls us to follow, in which we find our hope.