

Huldah - God's Prophet

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a six-part series

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2 Kings 22:1-20 (CEB)

Josiah was 8 years old when he became king, and he ruled for thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jedidah; she was Adaiah's daughter and was from Bozkath.

²He did what was right in the LORD's eyes, and walked in the ways of his ancestor David—not deviating from it even a bit to the right or left.

³In the eighteenth year of King Josiah's rule, he sent the secretary Shaphan, Azaliah's son and Meshullam's grandson, to the LORD's temple with the following orders: ⁴"Go to the high priest Hilkiah. Have him carefully count the money that has been brought to the LORD's temple and that has been collected from the people by the doorkeepers. ⁵It should be given to the supervisors in charge of the LORD's temple, who in turn should pay it to those who are in the LORD's temple, repairing the temple—⁶the carpenters, the builders, and the masons. It should be used to pay for lumber and quarried stone to repair the temple. ⁷But there's no need to check on them regarding the money they receive, because they are honest workers."

⁸The high priest Hilkiah told Shaphan the secretary: "I have found the Instruction scroll in the LORD's temple." Then Hilkiah turned the scroll over to Shaphan, who read it.

⁹Shaphan the secretary then went to the king and reported this to him: "Your officials have released the money that was found in the temple and have handed it over to those who supervise the work in the LORD's temple." ¹⁰Then Shaphan the secretary told the king, "Hilkiah the priest has given me a scroll," and he read it out loud before the king.

¹¹As soon as the king heard what the Instruction scroll said, he ripped his clothes. ¹²The king ordered the priest Hilkiah, Shaphan's son Ahikam, Micaiah's son Achbor, Shaphan the secretary, and Asaiah the royal officer as follows: ¹³"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. The LORD must be furious with us because our ancestors failed to obey the words of this scroll and do everything written in it about us."

¹⁴So Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah. She was married to Shallum, Tikvah's son and Harhas' grandson, who was in charge of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem in the second district. When they spoke to her, ¹⁵she replied, "This is what the LORD, Israel's God, says: Tell this to the man who sent you to me: ¹⁶This is what the LORD says: I am about to bring disaster on this place and its citizens—all the words in the scroll that Judah's king has read! ¹⁷My anger burns against this place, never to be quenched, because they've deserted me and have burned incense to other gods, angering me by everything they have done. ¹⁸But also say this to the king of Judah, who sent you to question the LORD: This is what the LORD, Israel's God, says about the message you've just heard: ¹⁹Because your heart was broken and you submitted before the LORD when you heard what I said about this place and its citizens—that they will become a horror and a curse—and because you ripped your clothes and cried before me, I have listened to you, declares the LORD. ²⁰That's why I will gather you to your ancestors, and you will go to your grave in peace. You won't experience the disaster I am about to bring on this place."

When the king of Israel must know whether he holds in his hands the genuine word of God, to whom does he turn? A woman, the prophet Huldah.

We are beginning a new six-week series on biblical heroes of faith, all of them women. Some you are familiar with; others not so much.

There are quite a few churches in our area that wouldn't undertake this series, at least not as we are going to. Women in these churches can neither preach nor teach men. The men leading these churches claim that the exclusion of women from church-wide teaching and preaching is taught in the Bible. It is my hope that by the end of the series, you will begin to grasp that the far stronger biblical case is for the full participation of women in the ministries of the church.

And we begin with Huldah (. . . who???)

God sent lots of prophets to his people in the 300 years before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586BC. Their mission was clear. They were to call the people back to God,

to show them how far they had left the path that God had laid out for them, and to help them grasp the terrible consequences of going their own way. The prophets were enlisted by God to “tell forth” the word of God, not to foretell the future. Their work tools were God’s words, not crystal balls.

The Book of Kings

There are three books of the Old Testament that have been chopped into two pieces: Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. The writings were too long to fit on a single scroll, so they spanned two. That tradition is carried forward in Christian Bible’s OT, though not in the Hebrew Bible, as in the Jewish Study Bible on my shelf.

The book of Kings is aptly named. It tells the story of Israel from the time of King David’s death until the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple at the hands of the Babylonians more than 400 years later. Throughout this period God’s people were ruled by kings.

The book of Kings can get pretty confusing if you don’t understand the division of the kingdom. David was succeeded on the throne by his son, Solomon. Solomon was succeeded by his son Rehoboam, who immediately alienated the ten tribes of Israel that lived in the northern portion of the kingdom. The kingdom split in two. In the north was the kingdom of Israel with the city of Samaria as its capital. In the south was the kingdom of Judah with Jerusalem as its capital. The book of Kings tells the story of the two kingdoms in parallel until the northern kingdom of Israel is destroyed by the Assyrians in 722BC. The kingdom of Judah survived another 140 years until it was overrun by the Babylonians.

And there was certainly no shortage of prophets during the age of the kings, or at least those who claimed to speak for God. For example, 1 Kings 22 tells of hundreds of prophets in the court of King Jehoshaphat. Regrettably, the entire bunch told the king what he wanted to hear – that he would enjoy victory in battle. However, one prophet, Micaiah, insisted upon telling the truth – Jehoshaphat would fail . . . and he did. One mark of a true prophet of God was a willingness to tell the king or the entire community the truth they did not want to hear, regardless of the consequences to the prophet.

In his notes on Kings in the *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, Claude Mariottini outlines several tests that separate true prophets from false prophets. These include (1) Is the prophet willing to tell the community what they don’t want to hear?, (2) Is the prophet vindicated by what actually happens?, and (3) Does the prophet lead people toward or away from worship of the one true God? Finally, “the most trustworthy

prophet is the one who will seek guidance from the LORD; who will share with the community what has been seen and heard; and who will continue with the community to test and clarify the word, open always to further guidance” (p. 523).

Prophets such as Elijah, Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Elisha, Jeremiah and more are familiar to us from the pages of the Old Testament. But there are others, such as Micaiah, who don’t get as much attention. One prophet who should get much more press worked during the time of the great king Josiah, more than 600 years before Jesus.

Josiah discovers the books of the Law

Josiah’s grandfather, King Manasseh of Judah (686-641 BC), embodied all that could go right and go wrong with the kings of Israel. His early years on the throne were an abomination to God, as he led the people to other gods. But imprisonment by the Assyrians brought genuine repentance to Manasseh, who, after returning to Jerusalem, tore down all the images of other gods and the altars used to worship them.¹ His son, Amon, whose very short reign mirrored the terrible days of Manasseh’s early years, succeeded Manasseh. After Amon’s assassination, his son, Josiah, took the throne though he was only eight, in 640 BC.

¹ You have to put together the stories from 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles to get the full portrait of Manasseh. The book of Kings says nothing about his repentance.

² By the time of Josiah’s death, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Lord’s temple was only a few decades left. Josiah’s attempts to bring the people back to God and change course were too late and too little.

Josiah would reign for thirty-one years, until 609 BC.² The writers of Kings had this to say about Josiah: “He did what was right in the eyes of YHWH and followed completely the ways of his father³ David, not turning to the right or to the left.” (2 Kings 22:2)

When Josiah was sixteen, we are told he began to seek God. When he was twenty he purged the kingdom of all the altars, tents, images, and so on that were used for the worship of foreign gods and he ordered the execution of the idolatrous priests.

When Josiah was twenty-six, he led the people in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Everyone in the kingdom contributed wealth to this project and “the people did the work faithfully.”⁴

In the course of the reconstruction, the workers made a staggering discovery. They found a copy of “the book of the law of the LORD given to Moses.” It isn’t the discovery of the book that should stagger us, it is the fact that they had lost it in the first place. When he learned of the book’s recovery, Josiah tore his clothes in anguish and dismay for he knew that the people had not been keeping the covenant with God. But what was he to do next?

Josiah had these scrolls in his possession, but were they really genuine? Had the workers actually found the books of the Law that, we suppose, had been lost somewhere in the distant past? Was Josiah holding the bona fide word of God?

So Josiah sought out one of God’s prophets. It is fascinating that he doesn’t head for

Why do Israel and Judah fall?

In the eighth century BC, the Assyrian empire posed an ever-growing threat to Israel and Judah. Lying to their northeast, this pressure was most acute on Israel. Nonetheless, Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity at times.

One of these periods was from about 785BC to 745BC under King Jeroboam (the second). Despite this period of peace and the complacency it brought, after Jeroboam’s death the Assyrians overran the kingdom of Israel, wiping it from the map and exiling tens of thousands of the Israelites. The ten Israelite tribes that made up the northern kingdom would be “lost” forever, never again to be a national entity of any sort. These would be the lost tribes of Israel.

Why would this happen to Israel, and later, to Judah? We could leave God out of our explanation entirely, noting that Assyria and Babylonia were powerful and simply could not be stopped from their aggression. But this is not the biblical understanding. For the prophet Amos, Israel was no better or no worse than their neighbors and that was precisely the problem. From Amos 3: “Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you [Israel] . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities.”

Simply put, God expected more from his people. He held them to a higher standard, the standard of the covenant he had made with them. For Israel to be accused of oppressing the poor, as Amos accused them, was no small matter.

In failing to care for the needy while resting in the luxuries of their own prosperity, Israel revealed the depth of their sin and the abandonment of their special relationship with YHWH, their Lord and God. Such abandonment could lead only one place – to their destruction. Israel had forgotten that they were to care for the widow because God had cared for them. They had forgotten that they were to “let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

For the Jews, exile was essentially a jail sentence for their many sins against God. And when Jesus rose to read from Isaiah in his hometown of Nazareth, he proclaimed that the time had come for release of the captives.

² By the time of Josiah’s death, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Lord’s temple was only a few decades left. Josiah’s attempts to bring the people back to God and change course were too late and too little.

³ This is, of course, figurative. David was Josiah’s ancestor but predated him by 400 years.

⁴ The book of Chronicles helps to fill in some of the details, for that book also tells the story of the Kings of Israel, though it is a more “cleaned-up” version with its own perspective on events.

Jeremiah, who had begun his prophetic ministry more than five years before. Jeremiah's home was only an hour's walk from the heart of Jerusalem.

Instead, Josiah sent the scrolls to a prophet named Huldah, a woman, to confirm that they were actually the books of the Law and to provide a prophetic⁵ interpretation of their discovery. Huldah lived in Jerusalem's second district with her husband, Shallum, who was keeper of the king's wardrobes.

The fact that the king turns to her as a prophet of God in the patriarchal culture of the Israelites reminds us that God's work is never the province of only one gender. Huldah offers two prophecies from God. First, Judah remains headed for destruction. Their sin had been great and the consequences of their sin cannot be avoided. Very dark and difficult times lay ahead. But she also bears this word – Josiah will reign a long time and will die before the darkness descends on Judah. Josiah has been responsive to God's word and humble, she tells him. He won't have to see Judah's destruction.

Interestingly, our own Rev. JoNell Lindh has a great aunt Huldah. JoNell shared with the preachers a few reflections on Huldah (the prophet!):

- “According to Rabbinic literature, Huldah was consulted by King Josiah because he thought this female prophetess might be more likely than Jeremiah to intercede with God in his behalf. Jeremiah admonished and preached repentance to the men, Huldah did the same to the women. Huldah taught publicly in the school and may have even taught Josiah as a young boy.”
- “Huldah does reassure King Josiah that because of his piety, God has heard his prayer. She said he would die in peace and never have to witness the evil that was to take place. She was right. She listened to the direction of the Holy Spirit and was brave to speak.”
- “Huldah's role in the spiritual revival of the Jewish people caused the people to understand that their God is with them always and everywhere they are. Her trust in the Holy Spirit allowed the ancient Jewish people to keep hold of their culture and religion after the diaspora. Huldah allowed the Tribe of Judah to be a people of the book with its written code of conduct, commandments, and a covenant with God to unify them forever.”

The discovery of the scroll of the Law and Huldah's words from God, spurred Josiah on to substantial reforms in Israel. Whether the priests found the entire Pentateuch⁶ or only the scroll of Deuteronomy, we can't be sure. Again, the astonishing part of the story isn't that the scroll was found but that it had ever been lost in the first place. We don't know how long they had been without the written Law, but consider this: What if all our Bibles disappeared? Every one of them. From our homes, our churches, our libraries. Even from our hard drives and the internet. And all the ancient manuscripts as well. Every last one of them. And all the references and quotations in other writings. . . All of it simply gone, never to be recovered.

How would Christianity change? In our generation? Our children's? Our grandchildren's? Would the body of Christ survive? Could there be a church without the Bible? Could we rely merely on memory and tradition?

More than 600 years before Jesus, the people of God discovered that they had been confronted with these questions. And in that moment, when they had – perhaps – rediscovered the lost Law of Moses, the king turned to a woman to judge the manuscript and to provide guidance. It astonishes me that people think God would deny women that role now, in a church created by and sustained by his Holy Spirit.

⁵It is important to know that prophecy in the Bible is much more a matter of *telling forth* God's word than it is foretelling the future.

⁶ The Pentateuch, Greek for “five scrolls” is comprised of the first five books of the Old Testament. The Jews believed that the hand of Moses – virtually coming from God's mouth - had written those books. The five books also are referred to as the Torah, meaning “teaching” or “law.”

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, 2 Samuel 7 God's covenant with King David.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Jeremiah 31:31-34 Jeremiah brings the exiles a promise of a new covenant.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Kings 22 The prophet Micaiah stands alone and strong in the counsel of the Lord.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Kings 21:1-18; 2 Chronicles 33:1-20 The reign of Josiah's grandfather, Manasseh, as told in the book of Kings and in Chronicles.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Kings 23:1-30 Josiah's reforms after finding the scrolls and consulting Huldah.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

