

Huldah the Prophetess

Jon Garvey continues our series looking at the minor prophets in scripture

In 2 Kings 22, and in its parallel in 2 Chronicles 34, we read the account of how the 'book of the Law', or the 'book of the Covenant', was found in the temple in Jerusalem.

Josiah the reformer

The boy king Josiah, son of the reprobate Amon who had been assassinated by his own officials, came to a living faith in God when he was only sixteen. By the time he was twenty he set out to reform the religious life of Judah, breaking down the high places where the LORD was worshipped illicitly, and destroying the pagan shrines that had proliferated under his predecessors.

At the age of twenty-six, in the eighteenth year of his reign, he began to tackle the repair and purification of the temple in Jerusalem. We should not underestimate the difficulty of this task. The temple, now nearly 400 years old, was as much a heritage site as St Paul's Cathedral or York Minster, and its sacrilegious additions were considered memorials to the history of the nation. The kings of Judah had been defenders of faiths, rather than defenders of the Covenant of God, since Solomon's time.

To reverse all this required considerable courage from the king and his supporters, and no doubt he was regarded as much a bigot as any king would be today, were he to try to purify the Church of England. As 2 Kings tells, the 'holy' city

contained numerous shrines, some requiring human sacrifice. Even the temple entrance contained horses and chariots (statues?) dedicated to the Sun, and there were two pagan altars in the very courts of Yahweh's temple. Traditionalists must have been appalled at their destruction.

Then came the incident, so beautifully told, when the king sent his secretary to liaise with Hilkiah the high priest on the rebuilding

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work. At the end of their business the priest, a little diffidently, said, 'I have found the book of the Law in the temple of the LORD'.

Most scholars agree, probably rightly, that what he found was essentially the book of Deuteronomy, though the liberal stream built their whole structure of Old Testament criticism on the assumption that Hilkiah or his allies actually wrote the book. However Deuteronomy is constructed like a typical political Treaty, or Covenant, document of a much earlier age. Like such secular treaties a copy was ordered to be kept 'as a testimony at the heart of the nation, that is beside the ark of

the covenant' (Deut. 31.26). Perhaps Hilkiah found it there, or else abandoned in some storeroom of the temple.

Shaphan, the secretary, was as reticent as the priest. He mentioned the book to Josiah almost as an afterthought to his report, though it is clear he realised its importance. Josiah's response, however, was anything but laid back. Hearing Shaphan read the curses attached to

the covenant he tore his robes. He realised how angry God must be against the nation that had reneged on their treaty with the LORD, the consuming fire, the jealous God (Deut. 4.24).

Huldah the prophetess

The king sent a delegation, including the high priest and his most important officials, to consult the Lord through Huldah. She too instantly recognised the book of the Law as the word of the LORD. Her response is an oracle prophesying disaster to Judah according to the warnings in the book, noting Josiah's own humility and weeping, and promising that he himself would be buried in peace

before this destruction. It is a short oracle, and we hear no more of the prophetess. But there are important lessons here.

This incident raises important questions about the function of prophecy, and its relationship to Scripture. The book of the Law was the written word of God to Israel, as the Bible is to us. When it was rediscovered, the leaders of the nation, especially the king, recognised it as such. Its message was clear, as we can see by looking at Deuteronomy itself.

God's laws and standards were explicitly set out in writing, as were the curses attached to them for disobedience. Josiah, with a heart set 'to seek the God of his father David' (1 Chron. 34.3), understood its implications immediately, and he responded in a spiritual way by repentance. Why then did he feel it necessary to consult a prophet as well?

It was not for greater knowledge, for Huldah's words added very little to the plain words of Scripture except some personal words of comfort to the king. It was not for practical application either, for she gave none – and Josiah's further reforms appear to have been his own response to the words of the Law. The answer must surely be that the prophet was the one authorised by God to confirm the truth of God's words to the people of that generation.

The prophet's anointing seems not so much to bring understanding of God's ways, as certainty about their application, and communication of that certainty to the people. The prophet may tell us what we have already seen in God's word (and never anything that we haven't), but in a way that truly confirms to us that it is God who has spoken in that word.

This has much to teach us about not only the prophet of today, but the preacher as well. Indeed, faithful ministry of the word of God is prophetic by its nature. The preacher should not be looking for something new to say, but to make what, in one sense, is clearly stated in Scripture speak with the voice

of God to his hearers. This is why it is the word proclaimed, and not simply the word read, that is the central ministry of the church of Christ.

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powerful proclamation, that makes for a prophetic ministry.

Huldah the woman

No examination of Huldah, especially in our times, can ignore the fact that she was female! It is unwise to speculate on how she received her prophetic gift. She was a woman of social standing – a royal official's daughter-in-law. But status is not a necessary qualification for prophecy. We know that Old Testament prophets received their call direct from God, but we know precious little about how that call came to be recognised 'officially'.

Nevertheless it is remarkable that in such an epoch-making matter as the rediscovery of the Bible, the king should seek the counsel of a woman. It is all the more remarkable when one considers that both Zephaniah and the great Jeremiah were prophesying at this time.

My explanation is perhaps over-simple: Huldah was consulted because she was close by and other prophets were not. Clifford Hill says that Huldah was an older woman, much respected for her prophetic ministry, whereas, at that time, Jeremiah was a very young man, who had not long been in ministry. But she must have been equally respected, for it would not have been impossible to send for one of the others. No particular

comment is made about her gender in the text, and to the inspired writer it was clearly a matter of indifference: what mattered was her mantle of prophecy.

From this passage in isolation, then, it would be easy to see support for the contemporary sup-

position that gender in ministry is not an issue, since 'in Christ there is no longer male nor female'. The only problem is, this example is before Christ, whereas the 'difficult' biblical teaching on male authority is after Christ.

I will not attempt to cast much light on these questions here, not least because the story of Huldah is not actually about these issues. But one or two points may be worth noting for further study:

- It was the king who consulted the prophetess, and not she who sought him out, and she remained subject to him, as indeed to Shallum her husband.
- The words she spoke bore only God's authority, and none of her own.
- Her ministry to Josiah did not involve teaching him, for as we have seen, he had already understood the implications of God's Law for himself. Hers was a confirmatory word.

The implications of these points for the church today are for others to consider, but one thing should not be controversial: the role of women in prophetic ministry is in this story given clear Scriptural sanction. Only let us never forget, whether we are male or female, that our ministries are far, far less important than the message we bring, and its effects on the hearts of people. ■