Huldah: A Cunning Career Woman?

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Prophetess Huldah is one of five women in the Hebrew Bible referred to as nebi’āh, and one of seven named prophetesses in the rabbinic count.1 Her single appearance in the Hebrew Bible is documented at a time of political insecurity that called for prophetic mediation. It is Huldah, not Jeremiah, who the Deuteronomists chose to authorize the words of the book of the Law, making Huldah the person who, in Claudia Camp’s words, ‘not only interprets but also authorizes the first document that will become the core of scripture for Judaism and Christianity.’

The short account of Huldah’s background and prophecy is recorded in 2 Kgs 22:14–20 and again almost verbatim in 2 Chron. 34:22–28. The text is placed within the narrative about Josiah (2 Kgs 22–23:30), which in turn stands at the very end of the Book of Kings and thereby at the end of the Deuteronomistic History. The importance of Josiah has been widely discussed in scholarship, and the fact that Josiah is greatly idealized by the Deuteronomists (2 Kgs 23:25) is broadly acknowledged.3 The placement of Huldah’s oracle in the narrative about Josiah’s reform is significant: the oracle seems to be the factor that triggers Josiah’s extensive reformation of the cult (2 Kgs 23:1–24), thereby

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1 The five prophetesses are Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah and the unnamed prophetess of Isa. 8:3. Rabbinic sources account for seven prophetesses of the Bible among which Huldah is also mentioned: ‘Forty eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied for Israel’ (b. Megillah 14a). The seven prophetesses are: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Huldah, Abigail, and Esther. Brenner refers to an alternative list which counts nine female prophets in the Hebrew Bible, adding Rachel and Leah, see A. Brenner, I am…. : Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories, Minneapolis 2005, 159.


making Huldah the most important among the prophets of the Deuteronomistic History.4

The main questions elicited by this text and discussed in biblical scholarship concern the history of the text on the one hand and the choice of Huldah over Jeremiah on the other. When and why was the text written, and why was Huldah chosen to deliver a message of destruction to Josiah? In the following, I shall give a short review of the answers proposed before focusing on the fate of Huldah after her appearance in the two biblical books asking: how was Huldah understood by subsequent readers?

1 The History of the Text

The oracle is generally divided into two parts: the oracle of judgment upon Judah and the people (2 Kgs 22:15–17), and the oracle of assurance or of salvation to Josiah (2 Kgs 22:18–20).5 Both parts are comprised of an answer to Josiah who sent his men to ask Huldah for prophetic clarification and guidance, or even intersession.6 Literary tension within the text, such as the juxtaposition of the oracle of judgment (vv. 15–17) with the oracle of salvation (vv. 18–20), has led scholars to conclude that the oracle has been extensively reworked by the redactors of the Josianic narrative.7

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4 Thus, Tal Ilan concludes that ‘Huldah’s words to the king are a stock phrase of the Deuteronomist, used occasionally in the Book of Kings but shared only by Jeremiah. In the absence of Jeremiah himself from the Book of Kings, Huldah remains the single most powerful Deuteronomistic voice in it.’ T. Ilan, ‘Huldah, the Deuteronomic Prophetess of the Book of Kings’, Lectio Difficilior 1 (2010), 8.

5 These two oracles are chiastically structured; see, among others, Pietsch who argues for the literary uniformity of Huldah’s oracle on account of this structure which he sees as constitutive for the oracle; Pietsch, ‘Prophetess of Doom’, 3–4.

6 Sara Japhet, discussing the question of the nature of the oracle in 2 Chron. 34, argues that Josiah did not ask for guidance as much as for intercession, a nuance which can be seen in the rare use of the preposition beʿad, ‘for, on behalf of’, see S. Japhet., I & II Chronicles, London 1993, 1032.

7 For a recent brief review of scholarly discussion of the literary tensions within Huldah’s oracle, see M.A. Sweeney, King Josiah, 45–51. Some scholars have pointed out that Huldah’s oracle could be removed without disturbing the narrative about Josiah, a fact that indicates later editing. Thus Pietsch dates the oracle to exilic times and argues that it was included subsequently in an earlier narrative in the Book of Kings, see Pietsch, ‘Prophetess of Doom’, 6. For a different view, see N. Na’aman, ‘The “Discovered Book” and the Legitimation of Josiah’s Reform’, JBL 130 (2011), 57, who dates the text to late pre-exilic times on account of the