XI
HULDAH:
THE GUARDIAN OF TRADITION
II KINGS 22:14 AND II CHR 34:22

INTRODUCTION

According to the record of II Kings 22:14 and II Chr 34:22 the prophetess Huldah was consulted, on behalf of King Josiah, by the court’s most distinguished dignitaries: Hilkiah the high priest, Shaphan the royal secretary, and the royal officials Ahikam, Achbor, and Asahiah, in order for her to evaluate the scroll found in the Temple renovation of 621 B.C.

Swidler (1978: 1783), celebrated Huldah’s interview with the dignitaries as the initial step in developing the canon, stating:

The authority to pass judgment on this initial entry into the canon was given to a woman. At the beginning of the Bible we find Huldah; in her we discover the first scripture authority, the founder of biblical studies.

Huldah’s praise was also sounded by Phipps (1990: 14) who quoted Swidler’s admiration and added his own observation:

Modern readers might be amazed that a male high priest and a male secretary of state would be part of a group seeking expert knowledge from a woman, but the ancient historian does not express surprise at the situation.

Phipps concluded his article with this appeal:

It is time to restore Huldah to her rightful place. She was the first to place a seal of approval on a scroll. . . . She deserves to be honored as the patron saint of textual critics across the ages who seek to validate what is divinely inspired.

Tradition, however, has not dealt kindly with Huldah. Ginzberg (1938, VI: 377), citing Megillah 14b, noted
Eminence is not for women; two eminent women are mentioned in the Bible, Deborah and Huldah, and both are proved to be of a proud disposition. Deborah was haughty towards Barak ... and the prophetess Huldah spoke of Josiah as the “man (comp. 2 Kings 22:15), without giving him the title king. This “unpleasant” feature of their character is indicated by their “ugly” names. The former was called Deborah “bee”, and the latter Huldah “weasel”.

This derivation of Huldah’s name as “weasel” was the only thing Curtis (1910: 510) felt compelled to note about Huldah in his commentary on Chronicles; and Montgomery (1951: 527) in his commentary on Kings did little more to honor her than to suggest that her name really meant “snail.” Myers (1965: 207) limited his comments on Huldah to one sentence: “The prophecy delivered by Huldah was an uncomfortable one as may be seen from the substitution of ‘all the crises’ for ‘all the words’; this may be more a specific application of Deut xxvii, xxix 20.”

A bit more generous statement about Huldah came from Gray (1970: 726), who paraphrased the king’s command to the dignitaries, הורז גידיה, as “go consult the oracle of Yahweh,” [italics mine] and concluded,

The status of the prophetess Huldah is interesting in view of the fact that both canonical prophets Jeremiah and Zephaniah were already active at that time. It was probably felt that such independent spirits would give an answer which the priests considered ultra vires, whereas Huldah, the wife of a minor Temple official, would give the divine authority to what they sought without embarrassing them.

**HULDAH’S REAL NAME**

Although it is possible to deriving Huldah’s name from קְוָיָה, stem II, “to dig, to hollow out” or from קְוָיָה “weasel” (খুলদ =
[ḥald/ḥuld/ḥild] “a mole, a blind rat” [Lane 1865: 784] there is no reason to ignore—as have the commentators of the past—stem 𐤆𐤃𐤌𐤊𐤇𐤌 which is a cagnate of 𐤆𐤃𐤊 (ḥalada) “to abide, to continue,” often used in the Qurʾan of the righteous in Paradise, meaning (as cited in BDB 317) “duration, world (ὢῖῶν, not κόσμος).”

A more careful look at this Arabic cagnate is wanted. Lane (1865: 784) provided a lengthy definition, including the fact that 𐤆𐤃𐤊 (ḥalada) can mean “he was slow in becoming hoary when advanced in years; as though he were created to continue for ever.” The derivative 𐤆𐤃𐤌𐤊 (muḥallad) appears in the Qurʾan in Suras 56:17 and 76:19 (“they will be waited on by the ageless”). The word may be used for those whose hair remains black after they have aged or whose teeth remain despite the years. Lane (1865: 784) defined it as “always of the same age: never altering in age: or endowed with perpetual vigour; that never become decrepit; or that never exceeds the fit age for service.” Also of interest is 𐤆𐤃𐤌 (ḥālid) meaning “everlasting, perpetual, immortal, undying, unforgettable, glorious” (Wehr 1979: 294). Lane and Wehr also cite 𐤆𐤃𐤊 (ḥalad) “mind, heart, spirit, temper.”

There are obviously multiple layers of meaning for the name Huldah. Were she ageless it would suggest that she was mature enough to deserve the compliment. Combine the age factor with the mind/heart element and the result becomes a matronly “sage.” Or she may have been blessed with perpetual youthfulness, though obviously not immortality.

HULDAH’S TITLES

Huldah clearly has the title 𐤆𐤃𐤏𐤃 “prophetess,” but hidden in the MT of II Kings 24:14 and II Chr 34:22 is another title
which has been given, except in the Greek text of Chronicles, to her husband. Another look at the text is in order.

Huldah, the prophetess wife of Shallum ben Tiqwah, ben Ḥarḥas, keeper of the clothes and she was dwelling in Jerusalem in the Mišneh. (II Kings 22:14)

Commentators have puzzled over Josiah’s requesting the help of an unknown prophetess whose one credential is that she is the wife of the “keeper of the garments” (which were probably vestments of the court and/or the cult). Being the wife of a valet of the high priest or the king hardly qualified her to function as an advisor to the throne and temple. With prophets like Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Nahum being available why go to Huldah? Speculation suggests that they may have been out of town or that they would not have spoken favorably to the royal and religious authorities.

A better answer can be found by looking more closely at the MT שמר שמפורים שמר שמפורים “keeper of the clothes.” Standard lexicons recognize two meanings of שמפורים: “treachery” (which can be ruled out in this context since Shallum was hardly the guardian of court conspiracies) and “clothing, raiment.” But a third definition needs to be added, a definition which is perfect for this context. It would be stem III and the cognate of Arabic بجاد (bajdat / bujudat) “the true, or real, state and
circumstances thereof; the positive, or established, truth thereof,” as in the expression 
(hû ‘îlmun bibajdati ‘amrika) “he is acquainted with the inward, or intrinsic, state or circumstances of thy affair: or with the true, or real, state or circumstances thereof; with the positive or established, truth thereof” (Lane 1863: 153).

Lane called attention to the synonym of bajdat, namely, ašl which has three meanings relevant for understanding bajdat: (1) “the fundamental or essential part of a thing . . . the fundamental articles or dogmas, principles, elements or rudiments, of a science etc.”; (2) “an original copy of a book: and a copy of a book from which one quotes, or transcribes, any portion”; and (3) “the prime of a thing; the principal, purest, best, choicest, part thereof; what is, or constitutes, the most essential part thereof; its very essence” (Lane 1863: 65).

With these definitions of ašl in mind, Shallum becomes “the guardian of the essential truth,” the “guardian of the traditions,” or even the “guardian of the original texts.” But was he? If he was the guardian of texts or traditions, why was he not consulted by King Josiah and the high priest Hilkiah? Why would they have dealt with his wife rather than with him?

The answer to these questions is in the repointing and redvision of the MT. By shifting the space between the two words by one letter, Shallum becomes She-who-guards the texts/traditions or “she-who-guards the essential truths.” By the shifting of one letter, Huldah’s title emerges from the MT, a title which was always there in the Septuagint with its feminine participle φυλάσσουσαν “the
woman guardian” (Liddell and Scott 1966: 1961). Moreover, the Septuagint manuscripts have her guarding the ἐντολάς, the “commandments/ordinances.”

Since the feminine participle שָׁבָחה “dwelling” in the next phrase has the usual form ending with a ר, the Vorlage could have been שָׁמְרָה בְּנֵדֶרָם, reflecting a confusion of a ר and a ל, a common error well documented by Delitzsch (1920: 107 §105ab) like the Qere and the Kethib of Jer 52:21 כָּלְפָּה הָעֲצָמָה וַיָּאמֶר כַּלְפָּה הָעֲצָמָה. “the height of one pillar,” which reads in the parallel text of I Kings 7:15 as קָוָה הָעֲצָמָה וַיָּאמֶר קָוָה הָעֲצָמָה.

HULDAH’S RESIDENCE

The קָוָה הָעֲצָמָה מִשְׁמֲרוֹתָם מִשְׁמַנְתָּה of the MT קָוָה הָעֲצָמָה מִשְׁמַנְתָּה, “she was dwelling in Jerusalem in קָוָה הָעֲצָמָה מִשְׁמַנְתָּה,” has been variously interpreted. The Septuagint simply transliterated it as μασσα. The KJV rendered it as “college”; but most other translations have settled for the “Second District” or “Second Quarter,” although the NJB ventured “the new town.”

It just may be that קָוָה הָעֲצָמָה מִשְׁמַנְתָּה in the Vorlage did not reference a place, but a condition, namely “in her old age” (לַחֲמָתָן). The noun קָוָה הָעֲצָמָה would be the cognate of Arabic مَسْنَن (musinn) “old age, advanced in years.” The stem would be קָוָה נֶדֶר (sanna), as in the expression דּוֹרֶא חָסָן (dáwiya’ asnân) “the advanced in age or extent, of life; [the age attained;] used in relation to human beings and others” (Lane 1872: 1437–1439; noted also by Wehr 1979: 506). If קָוָה הָעֲצָמָה meant “one who is perpetually youthful,” Huldah would by definition be “in her old age” (לַחֲמָתָן). Her seniority may well have made her the prime candidate for consultation by the king and high priest, even though younger prophets were on the scene.
The “college” in the KJV was derived from the Aramaic "teacher" and "college" (Jastrow 864, 1679; BDB 1040). On the other hand, as a noun of place, need not be from "to repeat, to teach." It may be related to the Arabic سان (sanna) as the place where the commandments of God are disclosed, as in the expressions: (1) لناس سن الله سنة (sanna 'Ilahu sunnathu ilanâs) “God manifested, or made known, his statutes, or ordinances, and commands and prohibitions, [i.e. his laws,] to men,” and (2) سن الأم (sanna l'amra) “he manifested, or made known, the thing, affair or case” (Lane 1872: 1436). Either derivation supports the tradition in the Targum (on II Kings 22:14 and II Chron 24:22) that Huldah had an “academy” in Jerusalem.

CONCLUSION

Far from being an “ugly” name meaning “Weasel” or “Mole,” Huldah is the feminine equivalent of جليل (hâlid) “glorious” or the very complimentary way of saying that someone is “perpetually young” or “ageless.” True to her name, as interpreted above, Huldah remains an unforgettable righteous woman, a matronly sage, in the annals of Israelite tradition, giving her a kind of immortality. Philological evidence has been offered in support of the Greek text of Chronicles which identified her as “the guardian of the commandments.” She may well have been the guardian of “texts, traditions, and truth,” in light of the semantic range of the Arabic feminine cognate بجاده (bajdat) (= بجاده "traditions").

Although the MT could refer to (1) Huldah’s residence in the “Second Quarter” of Jerusalem, or (2) to her being “advanced in years,” or (3) to her “college/academy,”
II KINGS 22:14 AND II CHRON 34:22

It is impossible to disassociate מָשַּׁה הַקָּדְשֵׁי מִלְחָמָה from מָשַּׁה הַקָּדְשֵׁי מִלְחָמָה “verbal teaching by repeated recitation.” Even though the Mishnah, as a collection of oral laws compiled after 200 C.E., is irrelevant to Huldah’s moment in history, there may be more than a hint here that מָשַּׁה הַקָּדְשֵׁי מִלְחָמָה referred to oral tradition. It is not likely that Huldah compared scrolls like a textual critic. Were she in possession of scrolls, it would be difficult to account for the royal surprise when the temple scroll appeared. It seems more likely that Huldah was “the guardian of the oral tradition.”

Her title “guardian of the commandments” (with the Septuagint of II Chronicles) or “guardian of the (oral) traditions,” as I prefer, supports Handy’s (1994:53) conclusion that Huldah’s purpose as a character in the narrative is exactly what the omen priests in the Mesopotamian traditions had been. Through her the deity is allowed to confirm what previously had been revealed to the ruler by other means.

NOTES

1. See http://ebts.edu/tmedaniel/huldah.html for viewing the lexical items cited in this study.

2. II Chron 34:22 has בַּרְצֵהוֹת בֵּית הָיְשָׁר בַּרְצֵהוֹת בֵּית הָיְשָׁר for the בַּרְצֵהוֹת בֵּית הָיְשָׁר בֵּית הָיְשָׁר in II Kings 22:14. Chronicles also has φυλάσσουσαν τὰς ἐντόλας “the (woman) guarding the commandments,” whereas Kings has τοῦ ἱματιοφύλακας “the (male) keeper of the wardrobe.”

3. The printed editions of the Septuagint read στολάς “clothes,” assuming ἐντόλας “commandments” was a scribal error. Most commentators have ignored this variant in the Septuagint, though some, like Curtis (1910: 510), BHK, and BHS, would emend the MT נָא לְרָפָעֲךָ הַמְלָךְ in light of the Septuagint’s καὶ οἷς εἶπεν ὁ βασιλεὺς “whom the king commanded.”