

CLARIFYING
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BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER ELEVEN

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

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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* 14^b, 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, לְכִי דַרְשׁוּ אֶת־יְהוָה, 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 derive Huldah’s name from חֻלְדָּה, stem II, “to dig, to hollow out” or from חֻלְדָּה “weasel” (= خلد

[*hald/huld/hild*] “a mole, a blind rat” [Lane 1865: 784]) there is no reason to ignore—as have the commentators of the past—stem I 𐤆𐤊𐤏 which is a cognate of خلد (*halada*) “to abide, to continue,” often used in the *Qurʿan* of the righteous in Paradise, meaning (as cited in BDB 317) “duration, world (αἰών, not κόσμος).”¹

A more careful look at this Arabic cognate is warranted. Lane (1865: 784) provided a lengthy definition, including the fact that خلد (*halada*) can mean “he was slow in becoming hoary when advanced in years; as though he were created to continue for ever.” The derivative مخلص (*muḥallad*) appears in the *Qurʿan* 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 خالد (*hâlid*) meaning “everlasting, perpetual, immortal, undying, unforgettable, glorious” (Wehr 1979: 294). Lane and Wehr also cite خلد (*halad*) “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 “Huldah” designates a “matronly sage.” Or she may have been blessed with perpetual youthfulness, though obviously not immortality.

HULDAH’S TITLES

Huldah clearly has the title 𐤏𐤍𐤕𐤏 “prophetess,” but hidden in the MT of II Kings 24:14 and II Chr 34:22 is another title

which was given—except in the Greek text of Chronicles—to her husband. Another look at the text is in order.

חִלְדָּה הַנְּבִיאָה
 אִשְׁתֵּי שָׁלֹם בֶּן־תִּיקְוָה בֶּן־חַרְחָם
 שֹׁמֵר הַבְּגָדִים
 וְהִיא יְשֵׁבֶת בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם בַּמִּשְׁנָה

Huldah, the prophetess
 wife of Shallum ben Tiqwah, ben Harḥas,
 keeper of the clothes
 and she was dwelling in Jerusalem in the Mišneh.
 (II Kings 22:14)²

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 שֹׁמֵר הַבְּגָדִים "keeper of the clothes." Standard lexicons recognize two meanings of בְּגָד: "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 بجدة (*bajdat / bujudat*) "the true, or real, state and circumstances thereof; the positive, or established, truth there-

of,” as in the expression هو عالم بيجدة امره (*hū ‘ālmun 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 بجدة (*bajdat*), namely, أصل (*‘aṣl*) which has three meanings relevant for understanding بجدة (*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 שֹׁמֵר הַבְּנָיִם in mind, Shallum would have been “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 Hilkiyah? Why would they have dealt with his wife rather than with him?

The answer to these questions is in the repointing and redivision of the MT שֹׁמֵר הַבְּנָיִם. By shifting the space between the two words by one letter, שֹׁמֵר הַבְּנָיִם becomes שֹׁמְרֵה בְּנָיִם, a feminine participle with its direct object, “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 φυλάσσοουσιν “the woman guardian” (Liddell and Scott 1966: 1961). Moreover,

the Septuagint manuscripts have her guarding the ἐντόλας, the “commandments/ordinances.”³

Since the feminine participle יֹשֶׁבֶת “dwelling” in the next phrase has the usual form ending with a ת, the *Vorlage* could have been שמרת בגד ים, reflecting a confusion of a ת and a ה, a common error well documented by Delitzsch (1920: 107 §105^{ab}) like the *Qere* and the *Kethib* of Jer 52:21 קוֹמַת / קוֹמַת הָעַמּוּד הַשְּׂחָד “the height of one pillar,” which reads in the parallel text of I Kings 7:15 as קוֹמַת הָעַמּוּד הַשְּׂחָד.

HULDAH’S RESIDENCE

The מְשֻׁנָה of the MT יֹשֶׁבֶת בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם בְּמִשְׁנָה, “she was dwelling in Jerusalem in מְשֻׁנָה,” has been variously interpreted. The Septuagint simply transliterated it as μσσανα. 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 בְּמִשְׁנָה in the *Vorlage* did not reference a place, but a condition, namely “in her old age” (= בְּמִשְׁנָה). The noun מִשְׁנָה would be the cognate of Arabic مسن (*musinn*) “old age, advanced in years.” The stem would be שִׁנַּן (= سن (*sanna*), as in the expression ذوى أسنان (*dāwiya ʿasnân*) “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 הַלְיָהָה meant “one who is perpetually youthful,” *Huldah* would by definition be “in her old age” (= בְּמִשְׁנָה). 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 מִלְמַד “teacher” and מְדִבְרֵי “college” (Jastrow 864, 1679; BDB 1040). On the other hand, מִשְׁנָה, as a noun of place, need not be from מְדִבְרֵי/מִשְׁנָה “to repeat, to teach.” It may be related to the Arabic سن (*sanna*) as the place where the commandments of God are disclosed, as in the expressions: (1) للناس سن الله سنته (*sanna’ llahu sunnathu lilanâs*) “God manifested, or made known, his statutes, or ordinances, and commands and prohibitions, [i.e. his laws,] to men,” and (2) سن الامر (*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 خالد (*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 prophrtes and 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 بجدة (*bajdat*) (= בְּדָת “traditions”).

Although the MT מִשְׁנָה 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,” it is impossible to disassociate מִשְׁנָה from מְדִבְרֵי “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 מִשְׁנָה 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://daniel.eastern.edu/seminary/tmcdaniel/huldah.html> for viewing the lexical items cited in this study.

2. II Chron 34:22 has בְּיַתְּיָקֵהָהָּ בְּיַתְּיָקֵהָהָּ for the בְּיַתְּיָקֵהָהָּ סֵפֶר in II Kings 22:14. Chronicles also has φυλάσσοῦσαν τὰς ἐντολάς “the (woman) guarding the commandments,” whereas II Kings has τοῦ ἱματιοφύλακος “the (male) keeper of the wardrobe.”

3. The printed editions of the Septuagint read στολᾶς “clothes,” assuming ἐντολάς “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 דְּאִשְׁרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ to דְּאִשְׁרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ in light of the Septuagint’s καὶ οἷς εἶπεν ὁ βασιλεὺς “whom the king commanded.”