

The Prophet Huldah - Meditation

2 Chronicles 34: 22-28 & 2 Kings 22: 1-13

While doing research on Achsah last autumn (Judges 1) and Jehoshiba this summer (2 Kings 11), I met Huldah, the prophet. Unannounced she crossed my path, and I got very impressed with her.

Today I would like to let her speak to you. Lean back, relax, enjoy. Hear Huldah's clear dark voice...

I had just seen off the last of my students that day. I locked the door of the classroom and went across the yard with the little garden where we grew some vegetables and beautiful flowers. I picked some on my way to our little house behind the school. In the kitchen I put them in a jug and placed it on the windowsill.

I was alone. Shallum had taken the children to court. They loved to play with the children of the king. Our kids were a bit older than King Josiah's; Naomi already a teenager... so she was a mix of both to the king's little kids: a playmate and a babysitter. Shallum was the keeper of the king's wardrobe. He and the children would come home late because the king had ordered some new clothes and Shallum had appointed some tailors to come and make sure the new garments fitted the king well. Shallum knew that the king preferred various tailors – not so much for the variety of the clothes but because it was fairer to employ several people and make sure they had work. That day an old man from the countryside would come and for the first time bring along his two sons.

But the king had no idea that this day would end completely different from what he had planned...

I was going to warm up a bit of leftover lentil stew and sit in the yard with my bowl, when I heard a knock at the door.

Five of the king's most important ministers stood in front of my house and asked me to let them in. Now – to explain that: I am one of the prophets at the king's court. I get

called when the king needed help understanding God's word. I am to King Josiah what Nathan was to King David.

So, I put my bowl aside and asked the delegation to take a seat in our yard. We sat there in a circle and they told me their amazing story:

In the course of the repairs at the temple, the contents of the temple must have been turned upside down, cleaned and rearranged. One item caught the attention of the high priest Hilkiah. It was the book of the law.

This book had been there for a long time but had been ignored and forgotten during the 55 years of Manasseh's – Josiah's grandfather's - reign.

Hilkiah and the temple secretary read the book and found that the content challenged their entire lives and the attitude of the whole people of Judah. They informed Josiah of the discovery and took the book to him.

On hearing its contents, Josiah was greatly shocked and tore his clothes. Pain and fear took hold of him. Fear not just for himself but for us all...

And he had done right.

I was shocked too.

The book condemned the religious life of Judah and the presences of the foreign gods that were worshipped in the temple. God's anger was burning against the king and all of Judah, because our forefathers had not obeyed God.

Since the period of Manasseh and throughout his long reign, and during the short reign of Amon, King Josiah's father, our people had been living in disobedience to God's ways.

They had acted against the word of God and the judgement was already clear.

Josiah had instructed his officials to go "and inquire of the Lord..." so they went to consult me.

But what could I say? Prophets often had to interpret & explain things that did not really please the king. Jeremiah and Isaiah were in that role too.

The situation was: Israel had gone through hell.

Way after the great kings David and Solomon, bad kings broke the covenant with God and ruined country and people. Good kings, kind of “repaired” the relationship with God at times, but they never reigned long enough.

Josiah was one of the good kings.

His grandfather though was Manasseh. He reigned 53 years in Jerusalem. He built altars for the wrong gods, and he misled his people to do one evil after the other.

Josiah’s father was Amon. He was 22 years when he began to reign. He reigned for 2 years. He disobeyed God, and got in deep conflict with his servants. They conspired against him and killed him in his house. But then came the people from outside Jerusalem, the “people of the land” and killed all those who had conspired against Amon.

Out of this mess came the coronation of King Josiah who at this point was just 8 years old. He did what was right in the sight of the Lord...

Since Josiah was only 8 years old when he was enthroned, the reign was in the hands of his mother Jedida of Bozkat. She had enormous influence on both: the king and the state affairs. For the people of Jerusalem and the people of the land around Jedida was a bearer of hope for change and reform.

And: she fulfilled their hopes.

Josiah grew up with a God-fearing mother who helped him reign justly. He was used to listen to wise women. So, it was not surprising, that on that crucial day after finding God’s book he sent his ministers to me.

I let them know that my message comes from God!

The message I gave about the impending judgement of Judah confirmed what other prophets had been saying before. I had no comfort for the king and the people. I told them that the sin of Judah had reached a point that the fate of Judah could not be reversed. I did though speak of God’s mercy because of the king’s humble cry of repentance and his great efforts for transformation and change. The disasters of the future would not come during the lifetime of Josiah. He would be saved of the sorrow of having to see downfall and disaster.

Josiah then assembled all the elders of the whole land, and all people to come and meet in the temple. He read the Book of the Covenant to them. He renewed his covenant with

God and encouraged the people to do so too. For all the years of his reign, Josiah required that people respect and honour God's ways.

Believe me, it was a hard job to not be able to speak of a bright future for Judah. Josiah in a way would have deserved it. And we often spoke about my two prophecies in the years which followed.

What should we do with this?

I admit, I felt a little bit betrayed at this point. And so did Josiah.

Here is Josiah with his God-fearing mother, his faith in the living God, his trustworthy co-workers, his reforms and political and religious efforts, his willingness to listen to me – and none of all that could save the future of his people.

There is this long history of failing and ruthless kings and the need for repentance and reform. Now, that we had the ideal king who initiated all-compassing reforms, his efforts came too late. The sins of the past weighed more than the righteousness of Josiah. He could not save the future of his people from devastation and downfall.

I often asked myself: Where was the redeeming and liberating word of God in this?

Josiah and I figured that the faithful response of one good leader does not gain salvation for all. Josiah was spared because he was pious and humble. But his nation was not saved on his account. And when we turned this round, we saw that God expects responsibility of the people? Responsibility of the ordinary peasants, traders, priests, temple servants, gardeners, crafts people, bakers, teachers, - men and women!

One corrupt, wicked and insane leader does not necessary cause a whole nation become corrupt, wicked and insane. God expects the ordinary people to observe clearly, judge wisely and fear him alone. He wants them to stand up for their rights and against perverse leadership. A nation must not hide behind a ruthless, egocentric and foolish leader, who is exploiting the people and ruining the land!

The story of King Josiah implies that we have to give our own independent responses to a graceful and loving God? ...give our own responses with our very lives.

I admired Josiah for carrying out the reforms despite the word of doom for Judah. He led us all in covenant renewal, repentance and reform. He had understood that it is the responsibility of the individual acting out what faith calls one to do.

He understood enough of the flow of history to see that the Babylonians and their oppressing rule were already at the horizon? He in the end knew that he could not prevent what was coming?

He instead trusted in a God, who would be there in the catastrophe with the people. With my help he foresaw that God would walk at the side of his people and suffer with them through destruction and disaster.

Josiah gave us all one great gift: A movement back to the living God.

He could not undo the mistakes of the past. He could not influence the immediate future.

But what he could do was giving us an idea of a good, God-pleasing life.

I know that he hoped that this would carry the people through... and lead them some time, somewhere into freedom, justice and peace.