

*Tal Ilan*

## **Huldah, the Deuteronomic Prophetess of the Book of Kings**

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### Zusammenfassung:

Unter den vier Prophetinnen, die in der Hebräischen Bibel namentlich erwähnt werden, ist Hulda ein Sonderfall, was durch folgende Punkte deutlich wird: 1. Sie ist die einzige, die tatsächlich prophezeit. 2. Ihre Prophezeiung erfüllt sich zwar nicht, doch wird sie nie als falsche Prophetin bezeichnet. 3. Ihre Prophezeiung für den König Joschija steht im Zusammenhang mit der Entdeckung des Torabuches. 4. Ihr rhetorischer Stil ähnelt auf verblüffende Weise dem Stil des Propheten Jeremia. 5. Bemerkenswert ist zudem, dass Jeremia im Buch Könige nirgendwo auftritt. Aufgrund der genannten Punkte wird in diesem Aufsatz geschlossen, dass Hulda für den Autor des Buches Könige die wichtigste Verkünderin der deuteronomischen Botschaft ist, in deren Geist das ganze Buch Könige verfasst wurde. Beweise dafür finden sich in zwei tannaitischen Texten, wo Huldas Grab und die nach ihr benannten Tempeltore als markante Punkte im Jerusalemer Stadtbild zur Zeit des Zweiten Tempels erwähnt werden.

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### **Introduction – Huldah and Deuteronomistic History**

In the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as in some of the writings of the Prophets, prophecy is very political in nature. A number of examples will suffice to demonstrate this. The prophet Samuel crowns kings – first Saul (1 Samuel 10:1-2) and then, when he is disappointed in him, he crowns David to replace him (1 Samuel 15:13). Ahiah of Shilo names Jerobeam King of Israel and urges him to rebel against David's rightful heir, Rehobam (1 Kings 11:29-39). The prophet Elisha crowns Hazael King of Aram in Damascus, so that he may set forth and punish sinful Israel (2 Kings 8:7-15), and he crowns Jehu in Israel, instructing him to annihilate the ruling House of Ahab (2 Kings 9:1-10). If these texts reflect anything, aside from the fantasy of the author, it is probable that some of these stories reflect self-fulfilling prophecies. Like Macbeth, who proceeds to slaughter Duncan King of Scotland, after three witches inform him that he will be king, Hazael proceeds to murder his monarch Ben Hadad in his bed after Elisha informs him of his immanent rise to the purple. Fiction and reality are too closely

intertwined to be distinguished one from the other. Yet had Elisha made such a prophecy, and Hazael not followed it, we would have had no story at all to tell. Elisha would have been crowned a false prophet and vilified or completely forgotten. The Bible usually only preserves the voices of those prophets who may be dubbed “true prophets”.<sup>1</sup>

Yet there is little doubt that it was people from prophetic circles who eventually wrote the Bible. The Deuteronomistic history is favorable to prophets. It supports Samuel in his battle with King Saul; it supports Elijah in his fight with King Ahab. It accords a major role to prophets throughout – even construing Moses the lawgiver as a prophet (Deuteronomy 34:10). Who were these Deuteronomists? Much has been written about them and there is obviously no one mind on this issue, but an almost universal consensus reigns with relation to the key importance of chapter 22 in 2 Kings for the understanding of this school of thought. In this chapter, King Josiah finds the hidden Book in the Temple, understands that to this day he has been a sinner, and proceeds to enact a major religious reform. Scholars agree, in light of the description of this reform, that the book in question is in some way connected to the Book of Deuteronomy, be it a mere nucleus or actual parts of the biblical book itself. Josiah’s reforms fulfill the constant void in ritual practices of all kings of Israel and Judah that preceded him, as described in the Books of Kings. He destroys all cultic locations outside Jerusalem, where the God of Israel had been worshipped, exactly as the Book of Deuteronomy prescribes, that the God of Israel be worshipped only at the one place he chooses to name (Deuteronomy 12), and in accordance with the expectations of the Book of Kings. 2 Kings 22 is therefore the highlight of the entire book.

As mentioned, the other aspect on which the Deuteronomic history focuses is prophecy. If chapter 22 is so important for the Deuteronomic concept of cult and kingship, what has it got to say in this context about prophecy? Quite a lot, actually. In this chapter we are informed that one minute before he actually begins his reform, Josiah approaches a prophet, in order to inquire whether he had correctly understood the message of the book. The prophet is a woman. She is Huldah. Following a description of her credentials, her words of prophecy are presented. It should be noted that Huldah is the only biblical prophetess who actually prophesies the future. She begins her speech, like a true prophet with the words: “So says the Lord” (2 Kings 22:15; 2 Chronicles 34:23) and then informs the king that he is indeed right in worrying. The sins Jerusalem and Judah have committed in not following God’s laws set out in this book are so grave that no amount of repentance can avert the calamities that God has in store for them. Her only words of consolation to the king are that, because of his good will, this doom has

been averted until after his death. The king will die in peace and be buried in the grave of his forefathers.

It should be noted that at least the last, most specific part of Huldah's prophecy, that Josiah will die in peace, did not come true. In the very next chapter in the Book of Kings we read "In his days Pharaoh-Nechoh king of Egypt went up against the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates: and King Josiah went against him; and Pharaoh-Nechoh slew Josiah at Megiddo, when he had seen him" (2 Kings 23:29). As I understand it, this means she was a false prophet.<sup>2</sup> And I am not alone in this. Exactly on this issue Baruch Halpern writes: "In the same way and without any literary mediation whatever, Huldah's oracle inspires the most extensive, successful cult purification in Israelite history, at least according to the narrator. Such an oracle makes perfect sense in a pre-exilic setting: ignorance of the book of the Torah had induced Judah to the precipice of disaster; drastic and swift action could and should have rescued it. Against such a reading Josiah's untimely death at the hands of Necho's army, and at the age of thirty-nine, would be an enormous embarrassment."<sup>3</sup>

That Huldah's prophecy was nevertheless retained means I think, that she had another, exceptional role to play. The king's question of Huldah is not another mere instance of a king seeking a prophet's advice, but is the key moment of the entire Book of Kings. In this book Huldah is the ultimate Deuteronomic prophet, who utters the ultimate Deuteronomic prophecy of doom. Jerusalem will be destroyed because its kings of Judah had not abided by God's Deuteronomic commandments.<sup>4</sup> In the following I will address this issue more closely. In order to do this, however, I propose a short digression into the question of prophetesses in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>5</sup>

### **1. Prophetesses in the Hebrew Bible**

The societies the Bible writes about, together with their Deuteronomic history, are patriarchal. In a patriarchal society the roles of men and women are clearly drawn – men lead an active life, they go out to work, they pursue careers, they engage in politics, and they serve in the army. They also lead households where women and children are found, and in which their word is absolute. Women also work, but they do women's work, at home, and on the farm – they cook, they bake, they clean, they spin and weave and sew. And they bring children into the world and raise them. Although it sometimes includes other stories, a book like the Bible, which tells the stories of kings and priests and wars, is obviously a man's book.

But a second and closer look on biblical texts reveals a much more heterogeneous situation and urges us to be careful in our reconstruction of patriarchy in biblical times. The monolithic patriarchy of the Bible easily cracks for example when we observe the role and office of the prophet.<sup>6</sup> Unlike a priest or a king, who are born into their roles, and can therefore, by definition only be men, a prophet, a biblical prophet, is chosen by God. When a person experiences the hand of God on her, or the spirit of God possesses him, there is nothing she can do.<sup>7</sup> As the prophet Amos says: “The Lion has roared, who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken, who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8). When Jonah attempts to escape his fate as prophet, he is swallowed by a fish, who spits him back at the exact spot from which he attempted to escape (Jonah 1-2). When called, Jeremiah protests, saying: “I do not know how to speak for I am only a youth” (Jeremiah 1:6), but God answers him:

Do not say I am only a youth, for to all I shall send you, you shall go ... I have put my words in your mouth, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant (Jeremiah 1:7-10).

When the Spirit of God seized King Saul, “as he went he prophesied ... and he too stripped off his clothes ... and lay naked all that day and all that night” (1 Samuel 19:23-4). Such behavior generates wonder. Saul’s behavior elicited the saying “Is Saul also among the prophets?” When Elisha comes to anoint Jehu king of Israel, the latter’s followers inquire of him: “Why did this mad fellow come to you?” (2 Kings 9:11). Yet God chose all these and they could do nothing but obey him. And as is well known, God acts in mysterious ways. Sometimes he chooses women as the vehicle of his message.

The Bible mentions four women by name together with the title prophetess (נביאה): Miriam, Deborah, Huldah and a woman mentioned in one verse, in a polemic outburst by the Jewish-Persian governor of the Satrapy of Yahad, Nehemiah – Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14), and one nameless woman, the wife of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 8:3).<sup>8</sup> The mention of these women indicates, I believe, that we are allowed here a rare glimpse into a historical truth. The Bible, as a patriarchal composition, would have liked to ignore it, but cannot. It takes note of this phenomenon and attempts to underrate it. The reference to Noadiah is particularly instructive here. Nehemiah, whose enemy Noadiah is, while reporting quite dryly, how his project to build the walls of Jerusalem was thwarted by his adversaries, suddenly turns to God, beseechingly: “Remember God ... the prophetess Noadiah, and the rest of the prophets, that would have me put in fear.” Obviously Nehemiah did not believe Noadiah was a true prophet but rather that she was meddling unnecessarily in politics, but he still calls her by the title prophetess. It was

too well known to be ignored.<sup>9</sup> The prophetic school to which Noadiah belonged has not left us its writings. We only know what her opponents thought of her.

Another prophet, Ezekiel, voices a virulent diatribe against woman prophetesses. He says:

Likewise, you son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own heart; and prophesy you against them, And say, Thus says the Lord GOD; Woe to the women that sew pillows to all armholes, and make kerchiefs upon the head of every stature to hunt souls! ... Wherefore thus says the Lord GOD; Behold, I am against your pillows, wherewith you hunt the souls to make them fly, and I will tear them from your arms, and will let the souls go, even the souls that you hunt to make them fly. Your kerchiefs also will I tear, and deliver my people out of your hand, and they shall be no more in your hand to be hunted; and you shall know that I am the LORD. (Ezekiel 13:17-21)

There is much to be said about this speech,<sup>10</sup> but I will limit myself to the observation that it is not really because these women are “false prophetesses” that Ezekiel berates them, but rather because they belong to a prophetic faction that stands in opposition to the one he supports. Since the sentiments of both Nehemiah and Ezekiel are allowed prime of place in the Bible, we may assume that the opinion of the biblical editors was not far removed from theirs. After all, even though Ezekiel mentions prophetesses in the plural, the Bible, as already mentioned, names only four, and only one of them (Huldah) from the days of Ezekiel himself. We may, however, imagine that there were many more, who failed to make their way into the pages of the Bible.<sup>11</sup> Even the patriarchal rabbis say so. In the longest talmudic discussion on woman prophets, we find an anonymous saying: “Forty eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied for Israel” (*bMegillah* 14a).

Having mentioned the Jewish rabbis of Talmud and Midrash, let me here add that in this article I will be using rabbinic literature as a guide. They, like the final authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible, lived in a patriarchal society, and as good exegetes, wondered at the presence of women in prophetic roles in their Holy Scriptures. Often they were the first to raise relevant exegetical, historical and pseudo-historical questions about these women, which they attempted to answer in light of their patriarchal ideology. I often follow their questions but part company with the answers they suggest for them.

So let us turn to the prophetesses themselves. What do they do in the Bible? Miriam is described as Aaron’s sister. She leads the women in a victory song after the crossing of

the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20-21), and elsewhere, where she is mentioned without her title, she complains to her brother Aaron about Moses' conduct (Numbers 12). Deborah is said to judge Israel, sitting under a palm tree (Judges 4:4-5), and after engineering Israel's victory over its enemies she too sings a long victory song (Judges 5). Both appear in sections of the Bible (the exodus story, the Book of Judges) that reflect the mythic past of Israel, and from it we may gain the impression that women composed victory songs, and those who excelled as poetesses gained the honored title of prophetess. The figures of both are shrouded in the mists of myth. They both seem to have been active leaders of Israel but at least with respect to Miriam we may gain the impression that her activity was strongly censored and silenced. Her complaint against Moses, in which she claims for herself an equal share in God's power to prophesy is punished by leprosy (Numbers 12:10).<sup>12</sup> That this is not the case for Deborah is probably because she is mentioned in the Book of Judges – a rogue book that has preserved many rogue traditions associated with women.<sup>13</sup> It should come as no surprise though that a later evaluation of Deborah's story does much to diminish her role.<sup>14</sup> The rabbis, for example, take issue with her name – bee. They view it as a reflection of her negative character traits. They couple Deborah with the other prophetess – Huldah, whose name refers to an even more repulsive animal – a weasel. They say: "There were two arrogant women whose names were hateful. One was named 'wasp' (in Aramaic זיבורתא) and the other 'rat' (in Aramaic כרכושתא). Of the wasp it is written: 'She sent and summoned Barak' (Judges 4:6) rather than go to him. Of the rat it is written: 'Tell the man' (2 Kings 22:15) rather than 'tell the king' " (*bMegillah* 14b). Probably because in their time, a woman in such a position was unthinkable, even more than the biblical authors, the rabbis were disturbed by women attaining such power and they attributed them disagreeable personal traits because they didn't like their success.

## 2. Huldah and Jeremiah

All I said up to this point is true for Deborah and Miriam, but not for Huldah, who was, as I shall argue, a palpable historical figure. She lived at the close of the First Temple period, not so far removed from the period when the biblical books, particularly the Book of Kings, were put into writing, and, as I shall argue, she flourished in close proximity to the circles that put these books into writing.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in her case we do possess some external sources that may support the information of her found in the Bible. I refer here to early rabbinic (tannaitic) sources, which rather than the latter, amoraic ones, are not interested in biblical exegesis.

Let us begin by examining the texts in which Huldah appears in the Bible itself: She appears in an almost identical text, both in the Book of Kings and in the Book of Chronicles<sup>16</sup> and as mentioned above, when the King of Judah, Josiah, inquires of her what is the fate she foresees for Jerusalem she prophesizes doom and destruction. Yet when asked who is the great tragic biblical prophet of doom who foresaw the destruction of the First Temple but failed to rescue it, one is immediately reminded of the Prophet Jeremiah. A long biblical book is devoted to his prophecies – the Book of Jeremiah, consisting of 52 chapters, some of them his speeches, some of them a form of biography – the prophet's encounter with the last kings of Judah, the risks he takes in order to warn them, his imprisonment by the last king, his captivity by the Babylonians after the fall of Jerusalem, his release, and his final exile to Egypt in the wake of the assassination of the Babylonian governor of Judah.<sup>17</sup> It has long been recognized that the editor of the Book of Kings and the editor of the Book of Jeremiah have much in common. Both tell in great detail, sometimes in the very same words, the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath (2 Kings 24-5; Jeremiah 39; 40-1; 52).<sup>18</sup> Obviously the same source had served both. Also, both uphold the same theology, that the fall of Jerusalem was a direct result of Judah's sins.

We may well ask, together with the talmudic rabbis (*bMegillah* 14b), why did Josiah not approach the great prophet Jeremiah with the discovery of the book? After all, the Book of Jeremiah begins with a date – Jeremiah began to prophesy in Josiah's 13<sup>th</sup> year (Jeremiah 1:2). The Book of the Torah was found, according to 2 Kings 22, in his 18<sup>th</sup> year (2 Kings 22:3). Jeremiah was certainly active at the time. So why did Josiah approach Huldah on this occasion? In their usual fashion, the rabbis suggest a variety of answers. First, they maintain that Huldah was Jeremiah's relative and so he refrained from scolding her. Yet this answer does not satisfy them, for even if she was hanging out in Jerusalem, making a nuisance of herself and no one stopped her, why would a respectable king want her answer to his vital questions? On this they speculate that Josiah had approached Huldah because he knew that women are by nature softer and kinder than men, and he had hoped that her prophecy would spare Jerusalem. As we know, this hope had been dashed. Huldah had proved as tough as Jeremiah would have been in her place. So a third answer is suggested, by Rabbi Yohanan, who maintains that Jeremiah was not around at the time, for he had gone searching for the ten lost Tribes of Israel in order to bring them back. How the rabbi knew this remains a mystery. All these answers are highly imaginative speculations, fitting the patriarchal ideology of disbelief in the power of women that the rabbis held.



I suggest another answer to the rabbis' question. It is of some interest to note that the Prophet Jeremiah himself is nowhere mentioned in the Book of Kings.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the author of the book preferred Huldah to him. Since he was definitely a Deuteronomist writer, we may assume that the two prophets represented competing sources of authority for members of this school. The rabbis' answer that Huldah was Jeremiah's relative seems unlikely.<sup>20</sup> That she was of a like mind is more convincing. That Jeremiah was not the author of the Book of King's first choice for representing the authoritative voice of the Deuteronomist is extremely interesting.

In this context I would like to draw attention to a linguistic phenomenon. When speaking out her prophecy, Huldah utters the following words: כֹּה אָמַר ה' הִנְנִי מְבִיא רָעָה אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וְעַל יִשְׁכְּבֵי (2 Kings 22:16). It may be of interest to note that the exact same combination appears only once more in the Bible, in the words of Jeremiah in Chapter 19:3, foretelling the utter destruction of Jerusalem (כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת (אֵלֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִנְנִי מְבִיא רָעָה עַל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר כָּל שׂ מְעַה תִּצְלַנָּה אֲנִי (Jeremiah 19:15) (כֹּה אָמַר ה' צְבָאוֹת אֵלֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִנְנִי מְבִיא אֶל הָעִיר הַזֹּאת וְעַל כָּל עֲרִיבָה אֵת כָּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי עֲלֶיהָ לְכֹן כֹּה אָמַר ה' הִנְנִי מְבִיא אֲלֵיהֶם רָעָה (Jeremiah 11:11) (אֲשֶׁר ל' א' יוֹכְלוּ לְצַאת מִמֶּנָּה (Jeremiah 45:5) (כִּי הִנְנִי מְבִיא רָעָה עַל כָּל בְּשָׂר נָאֵם ה') in a letter he wrote addressed to King Jehojakim. The formula is not found in the words of any other prophet who is assigned a book in the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Verses including part of this formula do appear, however, three more times in the Book of Kings, once in Ahiah's prophecy of doom against the House of Jerobeam King of Israel (לְכֹן הִנְנִי מְבִיא רָעָה אֶל בֵּית יִרְבְּעָם וְהִכְרַתִּי לְיִרְבְּעָם מִשְׁתֵּינ בְּקִיר עֶצוֹר (1 Kings 14:10) and the Deuteronomist's chief enemy in the Northern of Israel; once in the words of Elijah against the House of Ahab (הִנְנִי מְבִיא אֲלֵיךָ רָעָה וּבְעֵרְתִי אֶחְרִיךָ (1 Kings 21:21) and the Deuteronomist; and finally in 2 Kings 21:12, just before the discovery of the Book of the Torah, just before Huldah utters her prophecy of doom. The words are brought anonymously, but they are an exact quotation of Jeremiah 19:3, mentioned above (לְכֹן כֹּה אָמַר ה' אֵלֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל הִנְנִי מְבִיא רָעָה עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם וְיִהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר כָּל שׂ מְעַה תִּצְלַנָּה שְׂתִי אֲנִי (2 Kings 21:12).<sup>22</sup> Why they are not assigned to their rightful author remains a mystery, but it fortifies the suspicion that Jeremiah's absence from the Book of Kings is deliberate. What we may conclude from this discussion, however is, 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.



### 3. Who is Huldah?

At this point another question that bothers the rabbis can be inserted. Having ascertained that Jeremiah was not around for the king to consult, they would like to know what credentials Huldah had to recommend her for this mission. The author of the Book of Kings himself is apparently at pains to answer the same question. He describes her familial credentials in order to make her respectable. She is described as a married woman. Not she, but her husband is provided with a two-generation pedigree, and a respectable occupation – he is guardian of the clothing (whatever they are) and they reside in the Mishneh. This quarter of the city, as its name implies, was probably built at a second stage. It is a new quarter, probably suburban, probably housed by the wealthy. It is also mentioned in the prophecy of Zephaniah (1:10) and in Nehemiah (11:9). Unfortunately both references do not assist us much in understanding better Huldah's geographic and consequently social status.

The rabbis continue in the same vein, embellishing Huldah's pedigree even further. In a complicated tradition, they suggest, based on a similarity between the name of her husband's grandfather and Joshua's burial site, that Huldah was the latter's descendent. Another rabbi suggests, on the contrary, also based on similarity of terms, that she was Rahab the Harlot of Jericho's descendent. Yet a third one harmonizes the two views by assuming that the two married, and that she was a descendent of both (*bMegillah* 14b). One wonders whether being designated a descendent of Rahab the Harlot is a compliment or a snub. Rahab is, on the one hand, the ultimate example of the righteous, repentant gentile. According to the Gospel of Matthew, even Jesus is descended from her (Matthew 1:5). On the other hand, unlike the respectable Huldah, who is described as a married woman, Rahab had been a prostitute. Even though marrying her to Joshua improves her social status considerably, she may nevertheless have passed down to her daughters and granddaughters some of the characteristics of the whore. That the rabbis wish to assign Huldah an illustrious lineage is beyond doubt. That in the process they also add a certain note of caution, or even mockery, is also likely. They cannot rid themselves of the notion that all women in the public eye, as righteous as they might be, are in some way always prostitutes (cf. *bMegillah* 15a).

All rabbinic speculations that we have seen up to this point are, in my opinion, an interesting attempt to provide the prophetess with a biography, in accordance with their understanding of the biblical past, and of women's position within it. My speculations are based on other premises. The rabbis assume that women should not be in positions of power. That if they are, it is an accident of circumstances, usually based on good family ties. I agree with the rabbis that pedigree was important at the time that Huldah

prophesied, but I claim that, in her case, it was probably not the decisive factor that made her important.

So, what was important? I think it is important to note that King Josiah in our story cooperates with the proponents of the Deuteronomic school. He assists in the reform they instigate and in return is praised as being the single most righteous king Judah had ever seen (2 Kings 23:25). What this description shows is that at the time of Josiah the marginal Deuteronomistic movement had for a short time a moment of grace and became associated with the government of Jerusalem. Huldah must have been part of this reform initiative. She was important because she belonged to a marginal group of prophets who, at a certain moment in history, made an alliance with a king of Judah and came to occupy positions of power. Her prophecy not only influenced a great religious reform but also left its stylistic imprint on one of the most important religious books in the world.

#### **4. Huldah Beyond the Bible**

Even in her time, Huldah's greatness was recognized. This I surmise, however, not from her short notice in the Bible, but from circumstantial evidence found in the early strata of rabbinic literature. Let us begin this last excursion into Huldah's illustrious past with a note of her last words to the king: "Therefore behold I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered in your grave in peace" (2 Kings 22:20). As I noted above, at least part of this verse never materialized. Josiah died in war, in a battle. Yet the prophecy that he be buried with his forefathers is followed by the author of the book of Kings. After informing us of the king's death, he states: "And his servants carried him dead in a chariot from Megiddo, and brought him to Jerusalem and buried him in his own tomb" (2 Kings 23:30). We may surmise that burial in one's tomb is important and its success is a blessing. When Jeremiah prophesies the terrible fate of the kings of Judah he says:

At that time, says the Lord, the bones of the kings of Judah, the bones of its princes, the bones of the priests, the bones of the prophets and the bones of inhabitants of Jerusalem shall be brought out of their tombs and they shall be spread before the suns and the moon ... and they shall not be gathered or buried; they shall be as dung. (Jeremiah 8:1-2)

One piece of archaeological data may indicate that Jeremiah's prophecy had indeed come true, though not in the way he had indicated – an Aramaic inscription dated paleographically to the Second Temple period relates how the bones of King Uzziah

were removed from their original resting place to another.<sup>23</sup> What is the context of this event? Is there anything special about Uziah, which made this his fate, or did this happen to the bones of other kings as well? An old tannaitic text may help us reconstruct the history of this bone-removal. Since cemeteries are considered impure, when building new residential areas, Jews had to contend with the question, what were they to do with old tombs? A procedure of removal of bones was developed. The removal of Uziah's bones must have been part of this procedure. An old rabbinic text discusses this issue. It states:

All tombs are evacuated [when a city expands to engulf them] except the tomb of the king and the tomb of the prophet. Rabbi Aqiva says: The tomb of the king and the tomb of the prophet are also evacuated. They said to him: But the tomb of the House of David and the tomb of Huldah the Prophetess that were found in Jerusalem were never disturbed (*tBava Batra* 1:11).

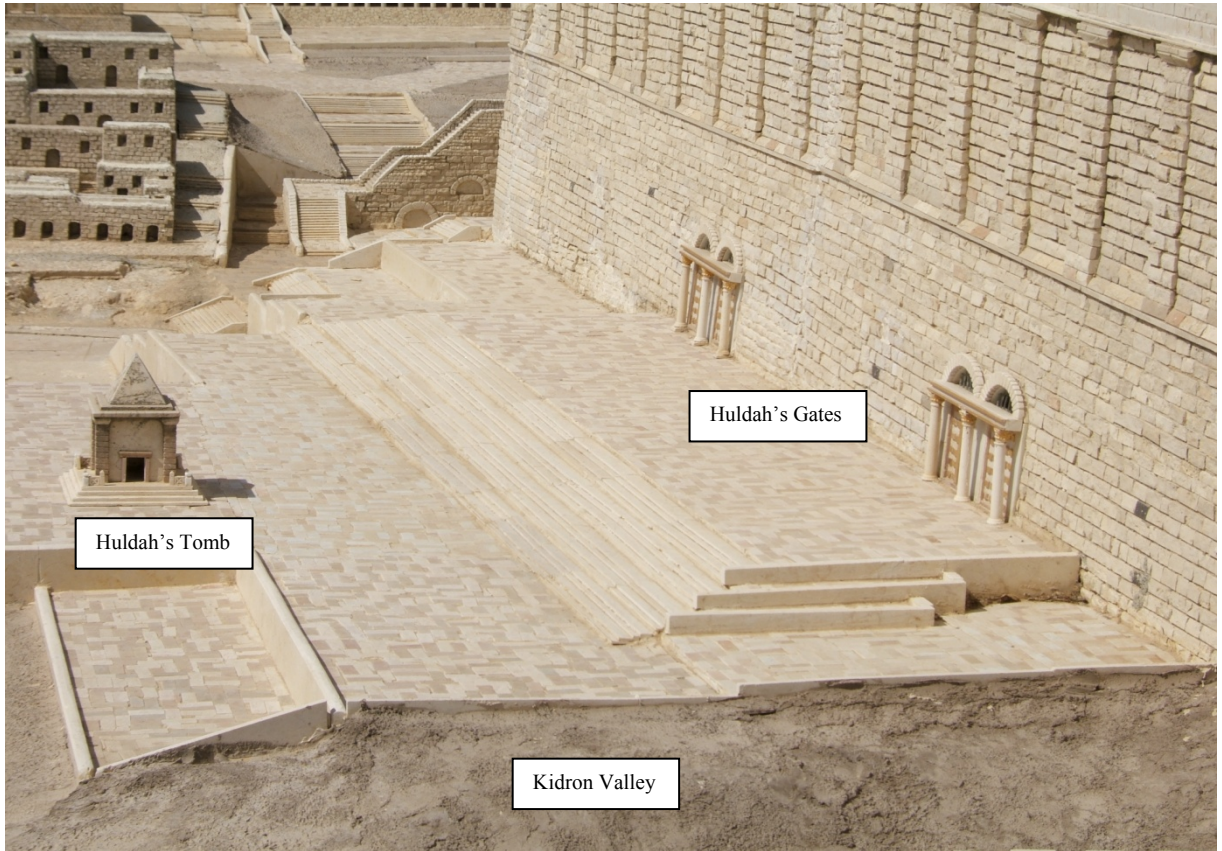
This tradition mentions two well recognized tombs that were still to be seen in Jerusalem shortly before the Second Temple was destroyed. About one of them, the tomb of David, we also hear from Josephus (*Ant* 16:179-83). The other is, surprisingly, the tomb of the Prophetess Huldah. Even today, in Jerusalem one still identifies two sites as housing the graves of these two heroes. David's tomb is to be found on Mount Zion, and Hulda's tomb is shown on the Mount of Olives.

Whether the historical Tomb of David is the one shown on Mount Zion is not our concern here. Yet as regarding the tomb of Huldah, we may be rightly suspicious of the identification. Firstly, the three monotheistic religions that compete over Jerusalem, also compete about the identity of the woman buried in this tomb (although all three religions agree that it is a woman buried therein). The Jews identify it as the tomb of Huldah, the Christian's as the tomb of Saint Pelagia, a holy woman of 5<sup>th</sup> century Antioch and the Muslims identify it the tomb of Rabiya al-Addawiya, a Sufi saint from 8<sup>th</sup> century Mesopotamia.<sup>24</sup> I submit that the rabbinic tomb of Huldah should perhaps be identified elsewhere. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the Mount of Olives, during the entire Second Temple period, while a recognized burial site for Jews, was situated firmly outside the precincts of the city of Jerusalem. It could hardly have constituted proof for the rabbis of a tomb whose bones had never been removed.

Interestingly, rabbinic literature itself may hold the answer to the query, where the tomb of Huldah may have actually stood. In another text in the Mishnah, which describes the Second Temple we are informed that "the Temple Mount had five gates. The two Gates of Huldah, in the south, served as an entrance and as an exit" (*mMiddot* 1:3). Here we

learn that, during Second Temple times, not only was Huldah's tomb a recognized landmark but Huldah the Prophetess had also given her name to the gates of the Temple. Evidently the most important gates, since they had serviced the entire population of pilgrims. Traces of these gates exist even today. Could they have received their name from Huldah's tomb which was located nearby?

Prof. Michael Avi-Yonah, who constructed a model of Jerusalem in the second Temple period, thought they did. In his model, he located the Tomb of Huldah just outside these gates. The rabbis supply supporting evidence for Avi Yonah's identification. When Rabbi Aqiva answers the rabbis regarding the tomb of Huldah, whose bones were never removed, he says: "There were tunnels beneath it which removed the impurity to the Kidron Valley." The Kidron Valley is indeed located just beneath the tomb according to Avi-Yonah's reconstruction.



Avi-Yonah's Jerusalem-Model (Photo: Ido Garfinkel)

South ←

## Conclusion

So, let me conclude – I identify Huldah as the most powerful Deuteronomic prophet of her days. The author of the Book of Kings certainly thought so. And when she died, unlike any other prophet, she left her mark on the urban landscape of Second Temple Jerusalem, many hundreds of years after her demise, and a memory of her prominence continued and pervaded the consciousness of the rabbis even after Jerusalem itself was destroyed.

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<sup>1</sup> For a nuanced discussion of these terms see David Noel Friedman and Rebecca Frey, “False Prophecy is True,” in John Kaltner and Louis Stulman (eds.), *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East, Essay in Honor of Herbert B. Huffman* (London 2004) 82-7.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this “false-prophecy,” and an attempt to solve the problem through source-critical methods, see John Priest, “Huldah’s Oracle,” *Vetus Testamentum* 30 (1980) 366-8. Also stressing this aspect is Leslie J. Hoppe “The Death of Josiah and the Meaning of Deuteronomy,” *Liber Annus* 48 (1998) 31-2. In their intelligent analysis of the historicity of “false prophecies” Friedman and Frey (“False Prophecy is True”) give prime of place to Huldah’s case. For an attempt to make the prophecy true see Diana Edelman, “Huldah the Prophet: Of Yahweh or Asherah?” in Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings* (Sheffield 1994) 239-42.

<sup>3</sup> Baruch Halpern, “Why Manasseh is Blamed for the Babylonian Exile: The Evolution of a Biblical Tradition,” *Vetus Testamentum* 48 (1998) 499. For his interpretation of the entire episode, and his ingenious if not quite convincing attempt to harmonize this problem see pp. 473-514.

<sup>4</sup> In this I completely disagree with Lowell K. Handy (“The Role of Huldah in Josiah’s Cult Reform,” *ZAW* 106 (1994) 40-53) who wrote: “The prophecy is a very bland stereotypical couple of phrases which could have been found anywhere in the Ancient Near East and from a wide chronological spectrum” (p. 51).

<sup>5</sup> The topic of the prophetess in biblical literature has aroused renewed interest in recent years. In the last SBL conference in New Orleans, November 2009 an entire session was devoted to the topic. The lectures given at the session were varied and included Esther Fuchs, “Women as Prophets/Women in Prophets: Gender, Nation and Discourse in the Hebrew Bible”; Wilda Gafney, “HaNeviyoth: Who Were These Women of God and What Were They Doing in the Scriptures of Israel?”; Anselm C. Hagedorn, “The Role of the Female Seer/Prophet in Ancient Greece”; Antti Marjanen, “Women Prophets Among Montanists”; Hanna Tervanotko, “Speaking in Dreams: The Figure of Miriam and Prophecy”; Jonathan Stökl, “Gender Ambiguity in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy?: A Re-Assessment of the Data Behind a Popular Theory”; Lester L. Grabbe, “Her Outdoors: An Anthropological Perspective on Female Prophets



and Prophecy”. I have used these lectures extensively in my study. For the texts of these lectures see [http://www.ualberta.ca/~ebenzvi/PTAC\\_2009/PTAC\\_2009.htm](http://www.ualberta.ca/~ebenzvi/PTAC_2009/PTAC_2009.htm). The session was held, I believe, in honor of the book by Wilda Gafney, *Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis 2009), to which I also refer. Also on women prophets in Ancient Near Eastern see Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Leiden 2003).

<sup>6</sup> See previous note.

<sup>7</sup> See John J. Ahn, Stephen L. Cook (eds.): *Thus says the Lord. Essays on the Former and Latter Prophets in Honor of Robert R. Wilson* (New York and London 2009). And the still relevant various discussions of Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia 1980).

<sup>8</sup> For a creative and exciting attempt to reconstruct this nameless woman’s prophecy see Axel Knauf, “Vom Prophetinnenwort zum Prophetenbuch: Jesaja 8,3f im Kontext von Jesaja 6,1-8,16,” *Lectio Difficilior* 2 (2000) [http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/00\\_2/v.htm](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/00_2/v.htm). On an attempt to reconstruct the prophecy of another nameless woman within the Book of Micah see Mayer I. Gruber, “Women’s Voices in the Book of Micah,” *Lectio Difficilior* 8 (2007)

[http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/07\\_1/mayer\\_gruber\\_womens\\_voices.htm](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/07_1/mayer_gruber_womens_voices.htm).

<sup>9</sup> For an attempt at a reconstruction of Noadiah see Susan Ackerman, “Why is Miriam also Among the Prophets? (And is Zipporah Among the Priests?),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002) 55-7.

<sup>10</sup> And for a similar interpretation see Nancy Bowman, “The Daughters of Your People: Female Prophets in Ezekiel 13:17-23,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (1999) 417-33.

<sup>11</sup> And see also Ackerman, above.

<sup>12</sup> See Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam* (Atlanta GA 1987). And see also Tervanotko, “Speaking in Dreams” in the recent SBL section, see above, n. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jo Ann Hackett, “In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel,” in Clarissa W. Atkinson and Constance Buchanon, (eds.), *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (Boston 1985) 15-38; Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago 1988).

<sup>14</sup> On Deborah in Josephus see Louis Feldman, “Josephus’ Portrait of Deborah,” in A. Caquot, M. Hadas-Label and J. Riand (eds.), *Hellenica et Judaica: Hommage à Valentin Nikiprowetzky* (Leuven 1986) 115-28.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford 1972) 21-7; Wilson, *Prophecy*, 219-23.

<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the Huldah episode in 2 Chronicles and the way it differs from the same episode in 2 Kings see David A. Glatt-Gilad, “The Role of Huldah’s Prophecy in the Chroniclers Portrayal of Josiah’s Reform,” *Biblica* 77 (1996) 16-31 and Louis C. Jonker, *Reflections of King Josiah in Chronicles: Late Stages of the Josiah Reception in 2 Chr 34f* (Gütersloh 2003).



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<sup>17</sup> Alexander Rofé, *The Prophetical Stories: The Narratives about the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, Their Literary Types and History* (Jerusalem 1988) 106-22.

<sup>18</sup> See *Ibid.*, 116-7.

<sup>19</sup> This is my suggestion, based on my observation. Scholars seem to ignore Jeremiah's absence from the Book of Kings and emphasize the similarities between the two books see e.g. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Despite the interesting modern attempt of Wilson, *Prophecy*, 223, to corroborate it.

<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon was noted by Edelman, "Huldah," 235-9, but she understood it as "apparent imitation of 'Jeremiac' style" (p. 239) and considers the entire text as a late composition, inspired by the author of Jeremiah. However, see below.

<sup>22</sup> On this prophecy and its connection to Huldah's words Hoppe writes: "Huldah's oracle, of course, is not the only time the Book of Kings speaks of Judah's tragic death ... Finally unnamed prophets speak an oracle against Jerusalem during the reign of Manasseh (2 Kings 21:13). Huldah's words, however transform Judah's exile from a possibility to a prediction," see Hoppe "Death of Josiah," 42-3. He fails to note however, the similarity of these words to those of Jeremiah.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g. in Klaus Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer* 1 (Göttingen 1984) 343.

<sup>24</sup> J. Seligman, und R. Abu Raya, "A Shrine of Three Religions on the Mount of Olives: Tomb of Huldah the Prophetess; Grotto of Saint Pelagia; Tomb of Rabi'a Al-'Adawiyya," *'Atiqot* 42 (2001) 221-36.

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