

## Huldah and Jerusalem in the Time of King Josiah

March 21, 2021

*II Kings 22:14-20*

The past two weeks we studied passages from *Deuteronomy* and its follow-up, the book of *Joshua*. This week's lesson leaps several centuries forward to the time of King Josiah of Judah, during the last years of the kingdom. But, there is a connection. *Deuteronomy*, at least a core part of it, is believed to be "the book of the law" mentioned as having been discovered in the Temple in *II Kings 22:8*. We have seen that in *Deuteronomy*, Moses renews the Covenant, and pronounces blessings for obedience to God's laws that Israel agreed to follow as part of the Covenant. Moses also pronounces the curses which will befall the Israelites if they are disobedient. Over the intervening centuries, the Israelites have been occasionally obedient, and more frequently disobedient. *Judges* through *II Kings* is a story of turning away, sinking into misery and oppression, then calling for help and repentance, and the Lord saving his people. But at each such cycle, things seem to sink lower and lower. By the time of Josiah, this cycle is nearing a pivot point.

In the Christian *Bible*, the Old Testament books of *Joshua* through *II Kings* are called often called books of "history." They do indeed tell the story of the Children of Israel, who emerged from the wilderness at the end of the Exodus. They conquered the land and settled in Canaan, only to fall into many of the habits and practices of the Canaanites that were before them. In the Hebrew scriptures, these books *Joshua* through *II Kings* are called the "Former Prophets." That puts an emphasis on what God was doing during these times. Many prophets are mentioned, some named, others not. Two of these books are named for the prophet Samuel, one of the most important prophets in Israel's history. But the great prophet Elijah, as well as others from this era, do not have separate collected books under their names. The "Later Prophets" of the Jewish scripture, such as *Jeremiah*, *Isaiah*, *Ezekiel* and the "minor" prophets, have named books. During the time of Josiah, we have Huldah, a "former" prophet, whom we see in today's lesson. At the same time, and also contemporaries, *Zephaniah*, *Habakkuk* and *Jeremiah* are "later" prophets, from whom we have writings later in the *Bible*.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel, separate from the Kingdom of Judah since Solomon, fell to the Assyrians in 723 B.C. Shortly after, the Southern Kingdom was saved from the Assyrians by a miracle in the time of Hezekiah (*II Kings 19:35*). Nevertheless, Judah seems to have become a vassal state shortly afterward.

King Hezekiah was a righteous king, and did what was right before the Lord. But his son Manasseh, the next king, was a different story. He fully compromised Judah as a vassal of the Assyrians. Was this just a matter of being “realistic” in the presence of a dominant superpower of the day? In restoring pagan Canaanite practices, Manasseh seems to have gone to an extreme. Yet even so, there seems to have remained unnamed prophets who spoke against these things (*II Kings* 21:10 ff.). Manasseh was on the throne 55 years. His son Amon lasted only two years before being assassinated. The “people of the land” rose up against the assassins and killed them, and put Josiah, King Amon’s son, on the throne at age eight. That would have been 640 B.C. Assyria was still a strong, seemingly invincible, empire. Likely Josiah’s handlers and advisors followed the previous “realistic” policies of accommodation. But as King Josiah reached adulthood, it became apparent that he was different from his father and grandfather. In his eighteenth year (at age 26, c. 622 B.C.) *II Kings* 22:3-7 finds him making arrangements for restoration work on the Temple. It was during that restoration that the “book of the law” was found.

The end for Assyria came suddenly. It was like the Berlin wall falling, the Poles revolting, and within a few years the end of the Evil Empire of the Soviet Union. I never expected that. I thought we would have, at best, the Soviet communists as an existential threat to the whole world for my whole lifetime. For Josiah, in the latter 600’s B.C., the Assyrian empire fell apart for reasons that are not entirely clear. Yes, the Chaldeans came in and took over Babylonia. The Egyptians rose in revolt. So did others. But Assyria had weathered such things before. A strong king would take control and put down revolts. In 652 an alliance of Babylon and all of Assyria’s other enemies was formed, but put down after six years of fighting, just before Josiah came to the throne. The Babylonians later revolted again and, joined by the Medes, conquered Assyria. The Assyrian capitol Nineveh was taken by 612 B.C. So, during King Josiah’s reign, the world was rapidly changing, with Assyrian power suddenly crumbling to dust. The collapse of Assyrian power gave the Kingdom of Judah freedom to depart from the Assyrian orbit, and gave King Josiah the opportunity to revolt against the continued Assyrian religious accommodations.

King Josiah acted when word of finding the “book of the law” came to him (*II Kings* 22:8-13). His instructions were, **“Go inquire of the Lord for me, for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is**

**written concerning us.”** (vs. 13). How does one inquire of the Lord? Those addressed included Hilkiah the High Priest, Ahikam, Achbor and Shaphan, the king’s secretary, and Asaiah, the king’s servant. Ahikam was a minister under Josiah, and later was Jeremiah’s protector in *II Kings* 25:22. Achbor seems to have been another minister under Josiah, and his son was later involved in killing the prophet Uriah (*Jeremiah* 26:22). (The parallel account *Chronicles II* 34:20 mentions an Abdon instead of Achor.) These five officials received King Josiah’s charge to seek an answer from the LORD. They went to the prophetess Huldah. It is interesting that the High Priest did not take this matter as his to settle. That’s a remarkable contrast to the high priesthood at some other times in history.

Huldah’s words are our scripture reading. Her words of prophesy confirm that judgment is coming due against Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah for the sins of worshiping other gods. Unlike previous occasions, the LORD would act, rather than relent. Nevertheless, Josiah would be spared from seeing this happen.

Josiah was one of the most righteous kings, maybe the single most righteous king, in Israelite history. Despite the prophesy that the LORD’s judgment would not be turned aside, he set about reformation. The extent of what he had to clean up is amazing – look at the long list of evil practices Josiah acted against in Chapter 23:

- v.4 Vessels in the Temple to Baal, Asherah, the “host of heaven” (stars, planets)
- v.5 Pagan priests who were maintained to worship all of the various idols and heathen gods in the Temple and at sites in and around Jerusalem.
- v.6 An idol of Asherah which had been worshiped in The LORD’s temple
- v.7 Male prostitutes maintained and operating out of the temple
- v.7 Women who wove “hangings,” fabric artifacts to honor Asherah
- v.8 “High places” (pagan worship sites) operating throughout the land
- v.10 Practice of having children “pass through the fire” in sacrifice to Molech.  
Earlier King Manasseh had sacrificed his own son this way (*II Kings* 21:6)
- v.11 Statues of horses to dedicated to (the god of) the Sun at the temple entrance
- v.12 Pagan altars within the temple, instituted by King Ahaz (before Hezekiah) and continued by Manasseh later throughout the Assyrian period
- v.13 High places to Astarte, Chemosh, and Milcom built by Solomon, and probably others as well (see *I Kings* 11:5-8)
- v.15ff. High place altar of the golden calf erected by Jeroboam at Bethel (*I Kings* 12:28-29), where there was a “sacred pole” (Astarte symbol) also
- v.19 High places throughout Samaria.

The astral cults, “the host of heaven,” and similar, were probably required by Assyrian overlords of all of their client states. But some of these practices of King Manasseh were probably not required, especially worship of the Moabite (Chermosh) and Ammonite (Milcom) gods. Child sacrifice, as mentioned for Manasseh, and also by the Moabites in *II Kings* 3:27 an example, seems to be a specifically Canaanite / Phoenician and even Moabite practice. All of these idols, and the religious practices that came with them such as child sacrifice and temple prostitution, were what God wanted the Israelites to avoid adopting from the heathen Canaanites, who with their practices, persisted throughout this time.

When the Assyrian capitol of Nineveh fell, a remnant of the Assyrian empire persisted to the west. At this point Pharaoh Neco II intervened, either to help save what was left of Assyria or to make it part of a renewed Egyptian empire. That made him an enemy of the Babylonian and Medes, who were fighting the remnants left of Assyria. On the way Neco had to pass through Judah/Israel. King Josiah decided to intervene, perhaps as an ally of Babylon. That was 609 B.C. The battle took place at the Hill of Megiddo, or “Har–Megiddo,” which came to be translated into English as “Armageddon.” That place is at a pass through Mount Carmel on the Mediterranean coastal road. Megiddo had been, and would be, the site of many battles, going all the way back to a battle between Ramses II of Egypt and the Hittites. Josiah was killed, and his body was returned to Jerusalem by chariot. With his death, hopes for the Kingdom of Judah came crashing down. The word “Armageddon” has come to mean a coming apocalyptic battle.

Neco continued north but arrived too late to support the Assyrians, perhaps due to Josiah’s efforts. The Egyptians later fought the Babylonians at Carchemish, where Neco was decisively defeated by Nebuchadrezzar, the Babylonian king. The Babylonians would go on to establish their own empire, ultimately destroying Jerusalem, as foretold by the prophetess Huldah. Egypt maintained control of Palestine for a while and had their own preferred son of Josiah placed on the throne as a client king in Jerusalem. That lasted only until the Babylonians arrived. King Jehoiachin surrendered the city to them in 597 B.C.

The prophetess Huldah likely was one of a number of prophets, the others unnamed, who continued in Jerusalem through the period of Manasseh, despite the apostasy of the king and the pagan religions he continued or instituted. We don’t know who made the prophesy recorded in *II Kings* 21:10-15. The word “prophets” there is plural. We might reasonably assume that Huldah may have been one of

those. They kept the word of the LORD alive during that difficult time when the temple was filled with abominations. This period seems likely to be when the Ark of the Covenant disappeared. Someone must have hidden away the scroll of the law that was later brought to Josiah. During Josiah's time even before the book of the law was found, a new generation of prophets was appearing. Zephaniah appeared in 630 B.C., then Jeremiah and Habakkuk in 626 B.C. Their messages were consistent with that of Huldah. Yet, they held out hope that despite the coming destruction, God would not forget His people. So, this seems to place Huldah in the company of God's faithful who persevered in the dark days. They were instrumental in King Josiah's reform, which would in turn be a foundation for survival through the Exile. Out of that catastrophe a Judaism was formed that thereafter absolutely rejected idolatry.

The lesson writer seems to consider Huldah as being undeservedly obscure. However, I have seldom even heard the story of Josiah's reform, of which Huldah is a part, told or preached. Maybe it is not in the "Lectionary," that prescribes certain Bible passages in a three year cycle, necessarily leaving a lot to never be covered. I find myself often stumbling across gems in the Bible, such as this one, which I had never appreciated until just at that time.

I am reminded that so much of what God did, and is doing now, is outside the spotlight. How did Christianity reach Rome, so that Priscilla and Aquilla should happen to be where Paul needed them in Corinth? We don't know. Who were the unnamed prophets who persisted during Manasseh's reign, and hid the scroll of the law so that it was not destroyed? We don't know that either. God knows. And, that's the important point. All of the things we humans do and record here on earth are perishable, and usually have no lasting value in the record of history. Sure, there are individuals remembered centuries or even millennia later, like Alexander the Great, Newton, Bach, and others. But even then, look how fast awareness fades! How many students today don't even know those names, much less any details of what they did! We are fortunate to have Huldah's name. That gives us a name to think of as we consider all of the many faithful of God's people here on earth, most of whom have lives and done their good works anonymous to history. But, we and they are remembered. We can trust God for that.

*Prayer: Gracious God, teach us about life in the exilic period so that we can understand this part of our history as your people. Help us to learn compassion and obedience through this story. Amen.*