

Huldah: Prophet of Doom

2 Kings 22:14-20

¹⁴ So the priest Hilkiah, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah went to the prophetess Huldah the wife of Shallum son of Tikvah, son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; she resided in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter, where they consulted her. ¹⁵ She declared to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Tell the man who sent you to me, ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, I will indeed bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants—all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. ¹⁷ Because they have abandoned me and have made offerings to other gods, so that they have provoked me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched. ¹⁸ But as to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, ¹⁹ because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the Lord, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the LORD. ²⁰ Therefore, I will gather you to your ancestors, and you shall be

gathered to your grave in peace; your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring on this place.” They took the message back to the king.

Theme Statement

King Josiah had heard the law of the Lord and, in the hearing, had been convicted of his people’s sin. The priests’ consultation with the prophet Huldah confirmed his fears. National doom was inevitable. Nevertheless, God mercifully promised Josiah’s death before Judah’s end.

Exploring the Word

In 621 BCE, eighteen-year-old King Josiah ordered that the temple be renovated. During that operation, the priest Hilkiyah discovered a scroll containing the law of the Lord. Biblical scholars believe that book was an early form of Deuteronomy.

2 Kings 22:14 Inquiring of the Lord

Upon hearing the scroll read to him, a distressed King Josiah sent servants to “inquire of the LORD” (22:13, 18). The servants sought the counsel of the prophetess Huldah.

Huldah’s oracle consists of two parts: an oracle pronouncing the fate of Jerusalem and Judah (22:16-17) and a second word of the Lord concerning Josiah himself (22:18-20).

2 Kings 22:15-17 Huldah’s word to “the man”

The news was not good for Jerusalem and Judah. Employing the “messenger formula” (“Thus says the LORD . . .”), the word is plain. Because Jerusalem’s inhabitants persisted in idolatry in clear violation of the first commandment and other stipulations of the covenant, the divine wrath feared by Josiah would indeed come to pass. Josiah’s pious (and political) effort to renovate the temple had

changed nothing. Judgment was final. The prophetic judgment already pronounced on Josiah’s grandfather (2 Kings 21:10-15) would be carried out.

Was that judgment too severe? It seems not. From our historical distance, it is hard to imagine how far Josiah’s contemporaries had strayed from the covenant demands. Besides the description of Manasseh’s idolatrous apparatus in the temple and other deeds of apostacy, we have the testimony of Jeremiah from the same period as King Josiah:

Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood, the fathers kindle fire, and the women knead dough, to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods, to provoke me to anger. Is it I whom they provoke? says the LORD. Is it not themselves, to their own hurt? (Jeremiah 7:17-19; see also 44:17-19).

A few decades later, Ezekiel’s vision in exile showed secret pagan worship, including the veneration of Tammuz and sun worship (see Ezekiel 8).

Jerusalem’s destruction, however, would not be immediate. Jerusalem would survive Josiah, if only by a dozen years.

2 Kings 22:18-20 Huldah’s word to the king

Yahweh’s word through Huldah to “the man” who sent emissaries to her (22:15) is not the same as the word they were to report to “the king of Judah” (22:18). Perhaps we are to understand that as “the man,” Josiah’s royal status counted for nothing. Royal robes would not allow him to escape the doom Judah would experience. Nevertheless, the Lord informed Josiah that his sincere piety did not go unnoticed.

Yahweh observed Josiah's response to hearing the law. The Lord noted that Josiah's humility and clothes-tearing grief did not stem from a concern about his personal well-being. Instead, hearing about the fate of the city and its people precipitated Josiah's distress and mourning (22:19). 1 Kings 23 details Josiah's zealous attempt to reform the worship of his nation in ways consistent with Deuteronomy. This passage, however, indicates that it was not his dramatic public acts that brought him a word of grace but rather his authentic love for Jerusalem and its inhabitants. Because Josiah appropriately heard (Hebrew *šāma* ') Yahweh's word against Jerusalem, Yahweh heard (*šāma* ') Josiah.

The grace Josiah received was that he would not live to see the destruction of his nation. Huldah pronounced that Josiah would die and be buried peacefully in his tomb (22:20).

The Word Today

Huldah said to Josiah, "Because your heart was penitent . . ." (22:19). The Hebrew word translated "penitent" by the NRSV is elsewhere translated as "fainthearted" and should be so here. Hearing the law made Josiah faint-hearted, edging on panic.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, there seems to be reasonable cause for hearts to grow faint. Deaths from the virus are, as of this writing in spring 2020, measured by tens of thousands. Neighbors fear infection from neighbors. Concerns about food supplies mount, especially as workers at meat-processing plants are ravaged by sickness. Not enough people heed the warning siren of medical professionals, some willfully violating orders to stay in place because they believe the virus is a hoax and their rights are being abridged, or because they cannot afford to stay home.

Indeed, at the end of April 2020, many states in America were reopening for business with no sure vision of what that might portend. As a people, we seem to resemble those ancient Israelites who engaged in annual rites prompting Baal to return from the underworld and thereby secure the national well-being. Our rites include shopping at malls, dining at restaurants, and consuming goods. We seem to believe that, should we not engage in these rituals, the economy will not rise and the nation will perish. "Better that the vulnerable die," some say, "and that they do so gladly, for the sake of the GDP!"

As Josiah learned upon hearing the law, this pandemic teaches that we participate in a society that is patently immoral. The virus uncovered the disparity and suffering that comes from a lopsided distribution of resources. While all suffered at some level, the virus disproportionately affected Black and brown communities, visiting them with sickness and death. As health care has not been equally available for all since well before the pandemic, those already in poor health were more vulnerable to COVID-19. The economic fallout of the virus struck hardest those working from paycheck to paycheck. The virus emboldened those who saw social disruption in the form of aggression and violence as an opportunity to forward explicitly racist goals.

Like Josiah, we are summoned to be dismayed *and* to seek the Lord amid bad news. From the perspective of this day—or any given day—we cannot know what the future will bring either for ourselves or for our society. Nevertheless, we can live in the confidence that our God hears us and promises to gather us, beyond our graves, into God's peace. In the meanwhile, like Josiah, we can work fervently together to tear down our society's idols so that all our fellow citizens might witness to the loving presence of God.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Share a time in your life when you felt fainthearted and nearly panicked.
2. Complete this sentence: When I seek the Lord's guidance and direction, I do so by . . .

Exploring the Word

1. Discuss why Josiah felt an urgent need to consult the word of the Lord (2 Kings 22:13). Why do you suppose he included the people and all Judah in his command?
2. Read Deuteronomy 28. List some of the promised blessings found there. List some of the promised curses. What specifically triggers blessings or curses?
3. Imagine that you are Huldah, charged with speaking the word of the Lord to Josiah's servants. What words might describe you in that situation?

afraid	duty bound	joyful
confident	holy	sad
doomed	hopeful	uncertain

4. Does the promise to Josiah that he would not live to see Judah's disaster seem like good news to you? Why or why not?

The Word Today

1. Reflect together on your own experiences during the pandemic of 2020. How has the virus affected your life or the life of your community? What have you learned about yourself or your society?

2. In what ways do you believe that God has been at work during the pandemic?

Closing Prayer

Lord, we live in a world that is broken by rebellion and violence. Help us not be fainthearted. Instead, keep us faithfully confident in your loving purposes. Use us to reform institutions and powers that conflict with your will. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Further Study

Deuteronomy 13; Joshua 24:13-28; Revelation 21

Daily Readings

M. Psalm 25:1-10	F. 2 Kings 22:8-13
T. Hebrews 4:1-11	S. 2 Kings 23:1-3
W. Deuteronomy 29:1-6	S. 2 Kings 22:14-20
T. 2 Kings 22:1-7	

Memorization

2 Kings 22:19

Because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the LORD, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and because you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, says the LORD.