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EDITOR'S PREFACE

The debate on the role of women in the Church and the society rages fast and furiously today. It is not only one of the current issues in theological debate, but what has caused a split in the Body of Christ and in the larger society as well. The social impacts of the feminist movement over the last few decades make the subject particularly important and urgent.

The problem of male-female relation is a universal one. Feminism arose, not just as a protest against male domination and oppression of the women, but a bold attempt to bring about a change. It is a campaign for a just society where all humankind who share a common creation and Creator are treated equally without discrimination based on sexual prejudice. Many male theologians have discussed feminism as emotional outburst by women who are jealous and envious of the pre-eminent position God has given to the male sex and that they only want to forcibly change what has been ordained by God and sanctioned by tradition, culture and religion everywhere. However, women's outcry is legitimate and justified. Most affected by the feminist movement is the Church. Feminist Theologians have not only challenged and questioned the Church's title deeds, but also the Bible, its sole authority. Feminists call for a new approach to the interpretation of the Bible that will lead to a new understanding of the Scriptures, which, had always been interpreted,

from the patriarchal point of view. Consequently, the movement has led to the publications of at least five editions of the Bible, which use inclusive language as part of the desired change.

Biblical scholars, both male and female, are sharply divided over the gender issue. Nevertheless, it is an issue that the Church cannot run away from. Since the Bible is the main source of the 'official view' of the Church on the role of women, Biblical scholars have a unique role to play in leading the Church and the society at large to the right path. The situation in Africa where women have suffered in silence for centuries makes the issue more pertinent.

It is for this reason that the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS) focused attention on this important subject at its annual Conference jointly hosted by the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin and the United Missionary Church of Africa Theological College, Ilorin, in July 2001.

This volume contains articles selected from the papers presented at that conference. The volume represents a major contribution from Biblical scholars in Africa on the subject.

S. O. ABOGUNRIN

Editor-in-Chief.

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THE PROPHETESS IN THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF ISRAEL : A CASE STUDY OF HULDAH

BY

REVD. DR. CALEB O. OGUNKUNLE

The demise of Solomon marked the division of Israel's monarchy into North and South, each of which was confronted with a series of problems which had negative effects on the people of God. Virtually all the kings in the Northern Kingdom did evil in the sight of the Lord "by following the footsteps of Jeroboam who made golden calves for the people (II King 12:25-33). In the Southern Kingdom, however, there were some kings who did "what was right in the sight of the Lord" through their religious activities, which resulted in revival in the land. Two of them were Hezekiah and his grandson, Josiah. In fact, Josiah's reform has been described as "the most thoroughgoing in Judah's history" ¹

But behind the scene in the religious revival of Josiah was the significant contribution of Huldah who has been described as "the most famous Hebrew prophetess"² The focus of this paper is the religious reformation of King Josiah and the major contribution of prophetess Huldah towards the reform. The paper adopts a historical approach by looking at the history of Israel at the time of Josiah and the effect of Huldah's prophecy on king Josiah. The paper concludes by relating the study to both traditional Religion and Indigenous Church in Africa, with some concluding observations.

1. *History of Israel at the Time of Josiah*

The late seventh century BC witnessed the fall of the mighty Assyrian Empire. The largeness of the empire made it impossible for proper supervision and control. The vassal states fought for their independence one after the other. The Chaldeans dominated Babylon for more than two centuries, especially under the leadership of Merodach-Baladan (721- 711 BC). ³ They had tried many times to free themselves from the Assyrians but each

attempt failed. Fortunately, at the death of Ashurbanipal, their prince and able leader Nabopolassar (626- 605 BC) was the viceroy in the Southern province of Babylon. He took advantage and established the Babylonian empire. On 9/10/October, 626 B.C. he defeated the Assyrians who tried for the last time to capture Babylon. By 616 BC Nabopolassar was in full control of Babylon and other places in Mesopotamia and by the end of 612 BC the three capital cities of Assyria - Assur Nineveh and Nimrud were destroyed.⁴

Judah was not left out in the bid for freedom. The long reign of Manasseh and his son finally came to an end. Josiah was enthroned by the people of the land who were always "involved when never the natural succession of the Davidic line was brought into jeopardy".⁵ Josiah, one of the best kings of Judah, began to reign when he was eight years old and he reigned for thirty-one years, (640-609). His reign was characterized by peace, prosperity and reform. Josiah, unlike Manasseh "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD when he was sixteen and he began his religious reforms when he was twenty (II Chro. 34:3-7). Consequently Josiah became the fourth and final reformer among Judah's kings following Asa, Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah. However, Josiah's reforms were more extensive than those on any of his predecessors. One suspects that Josiah took advantage of Ashurbanipal's death to enlarge his kingdom without opposition.

In the 18th year of Josiah's reign, he started the temple reformation which had been prophesied before he was born (1 kings. 13:2). He began to repair the temple which had been desecrated by Manasseh (11 kings 21:4-5, 7, 21) and to restore it to its former condition (11 kings 22:3-7). He sent Shaphan, the secretary of state and other government officials to begin the temple renovation. It was in this process that a copy of the Book of the Law was found in the temple (11 kings 22:8-10). There are two opinions on the nature of the discovered book of the Law. Some scholars

from the time of the Church fathers, have argued that the law-book found in the temple was Deuteronomy⁶ but other scholars regard the book as the Pentateuch.⁷

After listening to the reading of the book the king tore his robes in distress (cf. Gen 37:29,34; Josh. 7:6; 11 kings 5:7; 630; 11:14; 19:1; Est. 4:1; Job. 1:20; 2:12; 11 kings 22:11-13) and wept (11 kings 22:19).

11. Prophetess Huldah and Her Religious Contribution

There are four women who were specifically referred to as prophetesses in the Old Testament. They include Miriam, the sister of Moses, who led a dance in celebration of Israel's deliverance from Egypt; Deborah, the wife Lappidoth (Judges 4:4-5); Huldah, the wife of the keeper of the royal wardrobes; and Noadiah, who joined other prophets to intimidate Nehemiah (neh. 6:14). The rabbis added four more individuals, namely, Sarah, Hannah, Abigail and Esther but the rabbis did not list Noadiah. The Septuagint refers to Noadiah as a prophet and not as prophetess.⁹

The choice of Huldah for discussion in this paper is because she made more religious contribution than others. While Noadiah can be regarded as a false prophet, both Miriam and Deborah made more contribution in the area of politics than religion. Deborah was a political leader who was involved in the day to day affairs of her nation.

Prophetess Huldah, the wife of Shallum who was responsible for the royal or priestly wardrobe, lived with her husband in Jerusalem in the second part of the city. Huldah's living in the second part of the city of Jerusalem indicates that she dwelt in the part that formed an extension to the old city of which the exact location has been suggested as "west of the temple complex in the upper Tyropoeon Valley in the commercial quarter"¹⁰. This shows that prophetess Huldah was closely connected with the temple in Jerusalem. She is regarded as one of the "central prophets" in Jerusalem. The fact that the king's five officers, who were equally religious leaders,

sought out prophetess Huldah suggests that she was highly regarded for her prophetic role. Even though nothing is known of this prophetess apart from this passage, we can say that "she was highly distinguished on account of her prophetic gift"¹².

The fundamental issue which this paper examines is why should the king's officers, approach prophetess Huldah on this matter instead of going to prophets Jeremiah and Zephaniah who were contemporaries of Huldah and also lived in and around Jerusalem at that time? Four suggestions are given as explanation. One, Huldah was directly connected with the temple cult and was highly respected for her prophetic ministry. Two, Zephaniah prophesied before the reform of Josiah and the various abuses he attacked were addressed in the reform. Three, Jeremiah's ministry began in the latter part of Josiah's reign. Huldah's choice was because Zephaniah and Jeremiah openly attacked Jerusalem and Judah. Supporting the choice of Huldah and arguing from a feminist perspective, Ruth A. Tucker says:

Only Huldah could interpret the significance of Deuteronomy to the devout king Josiah, to Hilkiah the high priest and to Josiah's cabinet, Shaphan, Achaz, and Asaiah. Huldah delivered to these men a scathing denunciation of the religious corruption of the nation and a powerful prediction of doom that motivated the king to effect profound changes in the religious life of the people (II King 22:11-23:25). Thus, the spiritual leadership of a woman affected the history of the whole nation. *but then there was a message of peace for Josiah himself*

Prophetess Huldah demonstrated her prophetic ability as she spoke in the style of the classic prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. The phrase "tell the man who sent you to me" in II Kings 22:15 echoes the words of both Elijah to Ahaziah in II Kings 1 and Isaiah to Hezekiah in II Kings 19:6. The prophecy of Huldah is divided into two parts. The first part deals with Jerusalem and the people of Judah. She declared that God would certainly

send disaster on Jerusalem on the people of Judah as He had warned in the Law of Moses (II Kings 22:15-18). The judgement would come because they had forsaken God. The second part of the message was for Josiah (II Kings 22:19-20). She declared that Josiah would experience God's mercy personally because he had responded to God's word and had humbled himself before the LORD when he heard the law of Moses. She further prophesied that the king would die and be buried before judgement would descend on Judah. But the prophecy to Josiah seems to be at variance with the fact that the king died tragically and untimely in battle when he had an encounter with Pharaoh Neco (II Kings 23:29-30). However the phrase 'will gather you to your father' is a standard expression for death in the Old Testament. It speaks of either a peaceful death upon a sick-bed (cf. Gen. 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:29 etc) or a violent death by being slain in battle as in the case of Josiah and Ahab (I Kings 22:34-40). Therefore, there is no difficulty in reconciling Huldah's comforting words of assurance with the killing of the king in battle. The phrase "in peace" indicated that Josiah would die without living to witness the devastation of Jerusalem. In other words, Josiah would not experience the agony of the nation's destruction. Even though he died in battle, he was at peace with God and a befitting burial was conducted in his honour.

III. Effects of Huldah's Prophecy on Josiah

Following the prophecy of Huldah, Josiah immediately took some drastic steps that led to revival in the land. II Kings 23:1 begins with the Hebrew conjunction, 'waw conversive' which is translated 'then' or 'now' in this context. This indicates that the prophecy of the prophetess had a great impact and effect on the king. The first major step taken by Josiah was the reading of the law-book to the hearing of the people in a great assembly where they all renewed their covenant with Yahweh (II Kings 23:1-3). Thereafter, Josiah had his focus on the reformation, in and around

the temple and in the whole land. Vessels and places associated with Baal as well as priests associated with idol worship were destroyed (II Kings 23:4-6, 15, 19-20). The practice of divination was suppressed (II Kings 23:24). It is important to note that the passover feast had not been kept in such a way since the days of the judges (II Kings 23:21-23) and finally, Josiah centralized all public worship in Jerusalem, a measure which Hezekiah had attempted but without permanent success (II Kings 23:8-9).¹⁷ The reform of Josiah which was the last one in the history of Judah has been described as "a total purge of all non-Yahwistic cults and practices".¹⁸

The Old Testament tradition of women being prophetesses as illustrated in the prophecy of Huldah continues in the New Testament. The term 'prophetess' was used of Anna in Luke 2:36 and Jezebel in Revelation 2:20. There were other women who had prophetic gifts (cf. Acts 2:17-18). Philip the evangelist was said to have four unmarried daughters who prophesied (Acts 21:8-9). The gift of prophecy was exercised in the early church by various Christians irrespective of sex (I Cor. II:4-5).

IV. The Prophetess in African Traditional Religion

Traditional Religion in Nigeria recognizes women as priestesses or prophetesses. Some divinities in particular are closely connected with women. Some of them are Osun, and Iyamapo worshipped in Igbeti. Here women served as priests. R. Modupe Owanikin, while arguing for the priesthood of women in the church in Nigeria says:

Traditional Nigerian religion recognizes the priesthood of women. Priests and priestesses abound and have equal status and authority in religion. Women are not discriminated against but are even revered as mothers of society and exemplars in dedicated and resolute defense of their people, as in the story of Moremi and her son, Oluorogbo.¹⁹

This fact is corroborated by Bolaji Idowu who says; A woman who

came into a house with her own cult remains the officiant at the shrine of her divinity because she is the Olorisa and this line of officiants is continued by her own offspring.²⁰ Also on the roles played by women in the African Societies. N Ezeanya says:

She has her right and privileges and obligations ... In religion, the African woman has her role to play. In some place, she competes up to a certain level with men in those functions that are considered vital to society. She can exercise a certain measure of the priesthood here and there, hereby playing a veritable role as a mediator, helping to appease the anger of the gods, to reconcile man to God and the powers above man and to draw down the blessings of those powers on man.²¹

It is obvious from the above statements that women can serve as both priest and prophetesses in African Traditional Religion. However, this is not the case in the Old Testament where women serve only as prophetesses. In other words, the priesthood position in the Old Testament was exclusively reserved for men especially, the Aaronic family.

Also, the fact that women in the African society have a dual role to play within the family (cf. Prov.31:10-31) and in the religious life of the people is further highlighted by S. N. Ezeanya:

The role of woman has been traditionally indispensable not only in order that the men may be able to perform their acts of religion with the requisite pomp and pageantry both private and public, but also and especially because the divinities needed women to play their role in society by their own prayers and ministry, and what is more, to cater for the proper execution of the various rituals and give a guarantee of constant and palatable dishes on the occasion of sacrifice.²²

V. The Prophetess in the Indigenous Churches in Africa.

Just as women have major roles to play in priesthood in the African Traditional Religion, so also women have major roles to play in the prophethood of some indigenous churches in Africa. Hence, there is a strong connection between prophetess in the Old Testament and Prophet in the Indigenous churches in Africa. Generally some African Independent Churches have been leading in encouraging women to take part in ministry of the Church.²³ Prominent among the women leaders was Captain Mrs Christianah Abiodun Emmanuel, the co-founder of the Cherubim & Seraphim Church through her spiritual experience between 18th - 29th June 1925.²⁴ Captain Abiodun and Moses Orimolade worked together as evangelists and miracle workers, and Christians of all denominations, traditionalists and Muslims came to them for prayers and healing. Captain Abiodun, through her charismatic qualities, was able to lead several evangelistic campaigns to the interior of Yoruba land - Ile-Ife, Abeokuta, Ibadan, e.t.c.

Says: On this Omoyajowo says: while doubts are sometimes entertained about the sincerity of male prophets and visioners, female members in these categories have always been treated with awesome respect. The Cherubim and Seraphim places no barriers to women in spiritual matters.²⁶

Conclusion

It is appropriate to conclude this paper with the following observations:

Huldah is a suitable role model for today's Christian prophetesses. She was able to make her significant contribution to the religious life of Israel through her prophetic gift. Indeed, this is a challenge to several prophetesses in our contemporary churches where many are fond of seeing delusive visions for the purpose of material gains.

Everyone, male or female, has a role to play in the ministry of the church. Incidentally, African Traditional Religion recognizes the priesthood of women. Also, the New Testament does not discriminate in the matter of the ministry of women. Therefore, the gift of prophecy is not exclusively meant for males; it is also meant for females as well.

It is obvious that God has endowed some women with grace to carry out some specific assignments in the church as witnessed in the case

of Huldah.. Therefore, every woman must develop her God - given gift(s) and use such gift(s) effectively for the building up of the body of Christ.

Men should be humble enough to accept the spiritual leadership or prophetic role of any woman whom God has raised up. In other words, religious leaders in our contemporary society must follow the example given by the religious leaders at the time of Josiah.

Endnotes

1. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Third Edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981) p.317.
2. J.I.Packer ;Merill C. Tenney; & Williams White, *Daily Life in Bible Times* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), p.39.
3. A.T. Olmstead, *History of Assyria* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1975), p. 634.
4. See, C.O.Ogunkunle, "The Struggle of faith in Habakkuk 2:4 and its Application in Later Writings" A Thesis submitted to the faculty of winnipeg Theological Seminary in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts, with a major in the Division of Old Testament, pp. 22-3
5. A. Malamat, "The Twilight of Judah: In the Egyptian Babylonian Maelstrom" *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 28 (1974):126
6. See Bright, *A History of Israel*, p 319 and T. R. Hobbs, 2 King,

- Word Biblical Commentary, (Waco, Texas Word Books Publishers, 1985), p 325.
7. John F. Walvoord & Roy B. Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Victor Books: Wheaton, Illionios:(1985), p. 581.
 8. She was the daughter of Amram and Jochebed (Num. 26:59). Her first major role was watch the baby Moses in the bulrushes and suggested her mother to the daughter of Pharaoh as his nurse.
 9. H. Wayne House, "Should a Woman Prophesy or Preach Before Men." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145/578 (April - June 1988): 15-0 See footnote 34.
 10. R. D. Patterson, "1 & 2 King " in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible in Twelve Volumes*, Volume 4 (I King - Job). Edited by Frank E Gaebelain *et. al* (Grand Rapid: Zondervan Publising House, 1988, p. 284.
 11. Hobbs, 1 and 2 Kings p. 327
 12. C.F. Keli I & II King *Commentary on the Old Teastament Volume III* (Grand Rapids Wm. B. Eedmans Publishing Co., nd) p 480.
 13. Bright, *A History of Israel*, footnote 29 on p 320; Ogunkunle, "The Struggle of Faith...", p. 24 and patterson, I & II King, p. 284.
 14. Bright, *A History of Israel* footnote 29 on p 320 and Ogunkunle, "The Struggle of Faith...", pp 19-21
 15. Ruth A. Tucker, *Women in the Maze Questions and Answers on Biblical Equality* (Downer's Grove Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1992), p. 69.
 16. The phrase also contains a hint of an Old Teastement hope for life after death as reflected in Genesis 22:5, Job 14:14-15; 19:25-27; Psalms 16:9-11; 22 22-24; 49:14-15; e.t.c.

17. For more activities of Josiah, see Levi Dawson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (London: John Murray Publishers, 1974); p 39.
18. Ogunkunle, "The Struggle of Faith..." p. 24 As quoted from John Bright, *Jeremiah AB 21* (Garden City : Doubleday & Co., 1974); p 39
19. R. Modupe Owanikin, "The Priesthood of Church Women in the Nigeria Context" in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church Africa*. Edited by Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book, 1992), p. 217. She quoted from E. B. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, (New York: Lomngman, 1962, pp. 204-5.
20. Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* p.132.
21. S.N.Ezeanya, "Women in African Traditional Religion" *Orita: Ibadan Journal of Religious Studies*. X/2 (December 1976) 121
22. Ibid. p. 121
23. For a list of Women leaders in African Churches, See J. Akinyele Omoyajowo *Cherubim and Seraphim: The History of an African Independent Church* (New York: NOK Publishers, 1982), p. 200 and Owanikin, : *The Pristhood of Church women in the Nigeria Context*" p 218.
24. For detailed information, see Omoyajowo, *Cherubim & Seraphim*, pp. 5-7
25. Ibid. p. 200