



HULDAH

AND THE MYTHS OF MALE SUPERIORITY

LAURENCE IANNACCONE

MYTHS about “woman’s nature” and “woman’s place” are numerous. Nevertheless, the story of a single woman, recorded in a single chapter of scripture, suffices to dispel five of the most popular misconceptions. That woman was Huldah, and the five myths are as follows:

MYTH #1: God never calls women to positions of leadership, particularly not positions of spiritual leadership.

MYTH #2: This is a backup myth, invoked in those embarrassing situations when myth #1 clearly fails: If God does happen to call a woman to a position of authority, he does so only as a last resort, because the available men have proved themselves unworthy or unwilling. If men would rise to the occasion and exercise their natural leadership, God would never have to turn to women.

MYTH #3: Women are by nature more easily deceived or swayed by emotion than men, and cannot be trusted with important decisions.

MYTH #4: Married women should defer major decisions—particularly those concerning spiritual matters—to their husbands, who, as heads of the household, have primary responsibility for determining God’s will. Wives should operate behind the scenes, limiting their contributions to recommendations and requests.

MYTH #5: A woman’s place is in the home. Thus, even though a married woman may serve God outside her home, her primary roles remain domestic: cooking, child-rearing, housekeeping and so forth.

That these aphorisms are indeed myths is clear from the story of Huldah, recorded in 2 Chronicles 34 and repeated in 2 Kings 22. Huldah, the wife of Shallum, keeper of the royal wardrobe, was a prophet called to speak for God. This alone contradicts the first myth, for the spiritual leaders of her era were almost always prophets. As a prophet, Huldah stands with Israel’s most celebrated religious “greats,” people like Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Elijah. Indeed, Paul ranked prophets second only to apostles and clearly above teachers, healers,

miracle workers, administrators, and tongues speakers (1 Cor. 12:28). Huldah was a spiritual leader, God’s mouthpiece, a woman with authority.

The scriptures reveal much more about Huldah. She appears during the greatest religious revival in Israel’s history. For centuries the nation had drifted toward idolatry. But in the eighteenth year of his reign (621 B.C.), King Josiah initiated a sweeping reform. He cleared the countryside of pagan shrines and ordered a renovation of the temple in Jerusalem which had fallen into disrepair. In the midst of the renovation, the high priest Hilkiah discovered the book of the Mosaic law, which for centuries had been lost and forgotten. Recognizing the importance of the discovery, he immediately had the book conveyed to the king. When Josiah heard the law he tore his clothes in anguish, for he suddenly realized that even his own sweeping reforms had not begun to restore Israel to its original covenant relationship with God. If the book were authentic then the nation was guilty of greater sin than anyone had suspected. But was the book authentic? And if so, what should be done?

Josiah summoned the highest officials in the land and ordered them to obtain the word of God in this matter. Now it is significant that Josiah did not go into prayer requesting a personal revelation concerning the book, nor did his officials, nor did even the high priest. Rather, they went straight to a *woman*, the prophetess Huldah! But Huldah was not overwhelmed; she immediately replied, “Tell the *man* who sent you to me, Thus says the LORD . . .” (2 Kgs. 22:15-16, emphasis added). She proclaimed that (1) the wrath of God was upon Israel for its idolatry, but that (2) because of Josiah’s humility and repentance God’s judgment would wait until after his death. Implicitly, she also confirmed that (3) the book was authentic, and that (4) the law must be reinstated immediately. (2 Kgs. 22:16-20.) Upon receiving this word, Josiah read the law to all the people of Israel and began a second, far more extensive reform. Just how far Israel had strayed is apparent from the fact that the passover was observed for the first time since the period of the Judges.

Thus, Huldah stands at the center of Israel’s most important religious event since the Exodus. When the nation’s most powerful political and religious leaders could not trust their own judgment they turned to her, God’s prophet. They turned to a woman, and she replied

LAURENCE R. IANNACCONE, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Chicago, teaches economics at the University of Santa Clara. He has served as a minister in the Berean Bible Student Church, an Evangelical Protestant denomination, and has written a number of papers concerning women and the Bible.

with the authoritative word of God.

But were they right in doing this? Perhaps the king should not have deferred to a woman in such a weighty matter. Perhaps Josiah was weak or misguided and failed to realize that women are “by nature” unfit for leadership and that “a woman’s place is in the home.”

Everything we know about Josiah rules out this possibility. Josiah was anything but weak or misguided; he ranks as one of Israel’s greatest kings. Of him we are told, “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in the way of David his father; and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left” (2 Chr. 34:2).

Elsewhere the scriptures state that before Josiah “there was not a king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him” (2 Kgs. 23:25). A critical error at the start of his greatest achievement would not have been overlooked. Likewise, his ministers were singularly capable and committed; everything we know about them is good.¹ Thus, there is not a trace of evidence that Josiah and his ministers were mistaken in turning to a woman for the authoritative word of God. So much for myth #1.

Perhaps this analysis overestimates Huldah’s stature: Does she really deserve a place beside spiritual giants like Isaiah and Jeremiah? Could it be—as myth #2 asserts—that she was called upon only as a last resort, because no qualified male was available? Not at all! Huldah was by no means a last resort. 2 Kings 23:2 states that the king read the book to “all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the priests and the prophets,” indicating Huldah was not the only prophet available for consultation. Moreover, these others were not merely “false” or “lying” prophets. Quite to the contrary, Jeremiah and Zephaniah, two of the greatest prophets of all time, were contemporaries of Huldah.² Zephaniah’s ministry was just ending as the law was discovered. Jeremiah, on the other hand, was to remain active for many years to come. He began to prophesy around 626 B.C., five years prior to the discovery of the law, was active in Judah at the time of the reform, lived in Anathoth only four miles from Jerusalem, was known and favored by Josiah, and is even thought to have been involved in the early stages of the reform. Thus, it is quite possible that Jeremiah and Zephaniah were among the prophets who had the law read to them in 2 Kings 23:2, and under no circumstances were they far from the scene. Why then did not Josiah consult one of these male prophets instead? Why did he not at least check Huldah’s opinion against that of Jeremiah or Zephaniah? Certainly the matter was sufficiently important to merit their attention. The obvious answer is that in the matter of reinstating the Mosaic law, Huldah alone was God’s chosen spokesperson, not the high priest, not Zephaniah, not even Jeremiah. Huldah’s pronouncements were fully authoritative, both necessary and sufficient, and *not* because masculine leadership was lacking. There can be no doubt on this point.

So much for myth #2. God works through women even when qualified males are available in abundance. God called a woman to minister beside such spiritual giants as Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and King Josiah. He calls

women *at all* times, not just as a last resort.

The scriptures also relate that Huldah was married. Her husband must have had high status, for he was in charge of the royal wardrobe.³ Yet, he never emerges in the account as anything more than Huldah’s husband. Confronted by the nation’s leaders, and called upon to make what was perhaps the most important pronouncement of her life, Huldah acted on her own. She did not refer them to her husband, who as “head of the household” might be expected to have made all the major decisions. She did not scurry home and ask him to make the final choice; she did not even consult with him. As far as the account indicates, she unhesitatingly and immediately spoke on her own. What a contrast to the fully domesticated, Victorian stereotype that is so often mistaken for the ideal Christian wife! So much for myth #4.

Likewise, the account calls into question myth #5. The record does not state whether Huldah had any children, though it certainly is likely that she did. Nevertheless, the most important service this woman performed had nothing to do with domestic chores. She might have reared a dozen fine children; she might have kept the house spotless and served the finest kosher food in all Jerusalem, but the scriptures do not regard any of these details as worthy of mention. Instead, they report only her one great ministry—that of being a prophet. I have no wish to belittle Huldah’s domestic achievements, whatever they may have been; but it is clear that in God’s eyes her primary service was *not* domestic.

The implications of Huldah’s story can be summarized in a series of “un-myths” about the ministries of women:

1. God *does* call women to positions of great leadership and spiritual authority.
2. That call is in no way a last resort. God chooses women to serve beside many equally qualified men.
3. Women can provide men with deep spiritual insights and divine wisdom in matters of tremendous importance.
4. A married woman may be called to ministries which in no way simply support those of her husband, and in performing those ministries she may be called upon to act independently of him.
5. A woman’s place is wherever God wants her. Her crowning achievements might be domestic, but, equally, they might be in other areas like that of a formal church ministry.⁴

Notes

1. For example, Ahikam, the son of Shaphan, saved Jeremiah’s life at a later date (Jer. 26:24).
2. See Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, [1975]), pp. 298-309.
3. Some translations state that he was in charge of the “temple” wardrobe.
4. Jesus made this point in regard to the differing ministries of Martha and Mary. Martha perfectly fulfills the traditional stereotype of the ideal Christian woman. Every time the Bible mentions her she is busy waiting on others, devoting herself to domestic chores, and leaving the learning to men. Moreover, like many Christians today, she insisted that Mary do the same. But Jesus did not condemn Mary for being “out of her place” when she forsaked the cooking to sit at his feet and hear him teach. On the contrary, he rebuked Martha, and praised Mary for having chosen “the better portion.” (Luke 10:38-42, John 12:1-3.)