

Whom Do We Trust? Biblical Interpretation as a (Fe)Male Business

A Response to Judith McKinlay

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A few years ago, I was one of three female speakers invited to a School of Theology to give a motivational speech about my experiences as a female biblical scholar. The school was troubled by a group of male students who were being quite vocal about their resentment of women who strive for religious knowledge and leadership. Naturally, the female students at the school felt judged and intimidated by these young men and I was happy to offer my support by simply being there and sharing my story.

Being a biblical scholar, in my view, comprises knowledge, not necessarily authoritative leadership. While aware of the fact that such claims rest on particular understanding of the terminology used, I would think that the form of leadership or even authority I exercise in a classroom and in scholarly work alike follows the “Agora model” of sharing my knowledge, rather than the “Olympus model” of imposing my brilliance (Benschop and Brouns 2003, 207-209). Such a humble attitude, I thought, could hardly be provoking even for the most conservative of minds. After the three introductory speeches by the invited scholars, the young men and one young woman, sitting in the front row with their Bibles firmly pressed to their hearts, spoke out against the very existence of women in biblical scholarship. Their arguments were of a well-known kind: the Bible is clear about differences between men and women; women should devote themselves to domestic tasks; and Jesus was a man and had only male disciples, etc. I could see how these young people came to obtain such views—religious communities have been known to cherish misogynist ideas—but how was it possible that they had escaped the influence of their professors’ more progressive views?

The teaching staff (all men) were renowned scholars. As the session drew to an end, one of the professors joined the discussion in an attempt to rescue us from the outbursts of hostility. He invited us to tell the audience what it is that women *in particular* bring to the field of biblical studies. I replied that, naturally, women bring their professional skills and personal qualities, just as men do. The professor was not satisfied: “Of course, but there must be *something in particular* that women bring to the study of the Bible!” Again, my answer was that women do not bring anything that is *intrinsically different* from what a scholar of any gender brings: theoretical sensitivity, methodological awareness, and of course, personal ideological perspectives. Frustrated with my answer, the professor replied a third time: “So you say that women do not bring anything *particularly different* to biblical studies?” Again, I replied, “No, nothing connected to their gender *in particular*—what would that be?” In unadorned frustration, the professor exclaimed, “Then why should we have you?”

A few years after this event, as I worked on the story of Huldah in 2 Kings 22, I was taken aback by the fact that virtually all scholars ask this same question

about Huldah, the female prophet who played a central role in Josiah's cult reform. Why did the king's emissaries go to Huldah for advice when there was a male prophet in town? What was there *in particular* that a female prophet had to offer that justified such an "odd" choice? Interestingly, the biblical text does not ponder on this question, and the introduction of Huldah could not be less remarkable: "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" (2 Kgs 22:14).

It is a known fact in biblical scholarship that evaluations of biblical characters proffered by the worlds *in* and *behind* the text often differ from those put forward by later readers (the world *in front of* the text), and the story of Huldah is a good example of such variation. On the level of the historical event, behind the text, the king and/or his officials chose Huldah simply because she was there. In ancient Israel's cultural surroundings, female prophets were quite common and there is no reason to assume that the situation in Judah was radically different.¹ The introductory presentation of Huldah suggests that she was an integral part of the royal court, through her marriage and the location of her residence, while her words point to a close connection to the cult.² Huldah was, unlike Jeremiah, a "central prophet" and therefore a logical choice for the king (Wilson 1980, 222). Thus, the most rational explanation for the choice of Huldah over another prophet, male or female, is because she was familiar and reliable—the king and his emissaries liked and trusted her.

Also at the level of the text, the choice of a female prophet offers and requires no justification. Hugh Williamson argues that the deuteronomistic author/redactor was familiar with stories about Miriam, Rahab, Deborah, Hannah, and Abigail, and therefore added Huldah as a fitting end to an account of history in which women held central roles.³ It is also possible that the deuteronomistic movement saw in Huldah an influential ally that would have offered official support to their views of history. Thus, Tal Ilan (2010, 8) argues that, "in the absence of Jeremiah himself from the Book of Kings, Huldah remains the single most powerful Deuteronomistic voice in it."⁴ The most rational explanation for the choice of Huldah by the author/redactor of the Deuteronomistic History is because she was respectable and skilled, and because they liked and trusted her.

To my knowledge, the first time the question "Why Huldah?" was voiced by readers in front of the text is in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Megillah* 14b.

¹ In musical, funerary, and scribal guilds of the Ancient Near East, women were in some cases in the majority. The role of Huldah in the Hebrew Bible corresponds to the role of *Āpiltu*—court prophets at Mari. Gafney (2008) stresses the importance of the number of female prophets in Ninivite texts dated to the seventh century BCE.

² Priest (1980) points to textual support for this view in the typically priestly phrase "be gathered (*'sp*) to your fathers." Also Gafney (2008) sees Huldah as cult-prophetess because of the orthodoxy of the oracle.

³ Williamson (2010) stresses the fact that two female prophets, Deborah and Huldah, are the first and last prophets to be named in the Deuteronomistic History.

⁴ See also Frymer-Kensky (2002). Jones (1984) sees a connection between Huldah and Deuteronomists in the reference to her neighbourhood in Jerusalem, the Second Quarter, taken to be the expansion of Jerusalem towards the north where refugees from the Northern kingdom would have settled. For the Mishneh Quarter, or Second Quarter, see Zeph. 1:10 and Neh. 3:9, 12.

Athalya Brenner (2005) asserts that in Jewish tradition, Huldah is honoured with an office within temple walls, two gates to the Temple Mount, and a grave in the Jerusalem hills. The choice of a female prophet over Jeremiah, however, puzzled and bothered the rabbis considerably. In *Megillah* 14b they offer three complementary explanations: Jeremiah gave Huldah permission to speak in his stead, then he left town on business, and the king would have chosen a female prophet anyway because he was hoping that a woman would be more compassionate in her reply. In other words, they clarified that Jeremiah sanctioned Huldah's words, that she was a choice forced by necessity, and that she had a particular female quality that explained why she was chosen to do a man's job. To be sure, the rabbis did not question Huldah's expertise and did not disparage her intelligence—they never do that to women (Wegner 1991). Instead, they turned against Huldah's character, arguing that she was too proud and eminent for her gender, and for this, she was marked by an ugly name.⁵ This argument is a good illustration of rabbinic attitudes toward women as being profoundly different from men, not necessarily because of female intellect, but because of the inferiority of the female character (Baskin 2002). Hence, the most rational explanation for the dismissal of Huldah by the rabbis is because the rabbis did not like or trust her.

The matter of trusting a biblical character might not be a leading question for a biblical scholar, but we are often quite quick to decide whether we like them or not, and I believe that such decisions have an impact on the way we study the character and the text at hand. But the question of trust has proven relevant and useful in scholarship. It is not a matter of trust in a biblical character *per se*, but a matter of trust in the author/redactor that created the character. Today we ask with Gale Yee, Judith McKinlay, and many others, what preferences and purposes did the writers of biblical texts have, and whose power were they promoting? Esther Fuchs's argument, that biblical narratives in general promote "male centred epistemology" (2000, 19), forces a new assessment of Huldah's story as well. Judith McKinlay argued that that Huldah "as a woman, has been used narratively to give voice to a theological template that justifies the silencing of the feminine aspect of deity" (2005, 5). The abolition of the Ashera cult, popular among the women of Judah, depended heavily on a woman's voice. Nonetheless, the female voice was not employed to promote female interests. It is as if the author/redactor of the story conscripted Huldah, a female prophet, to be the agent of a cataclysmic social change that would promote the exclusiveness of a male God who would henceforth communicate in writing (so Frymer-Kensky 2002). Ironically, the exclusive control over interpretation of divine letter remained a male business.

I never had a chance to answer my colleague at the School of Theology; time was up and the assembly was to be dismissed. The question lingered in the room, though, as well as in my thoughts. It is a peculiar feeling to be subjected to open dislike and distrust simply because of one's gender. But it makes one attentive not to conform to power structures which view "Others" as "unbearable strangers" whose acceptance to the guild must be thoroughly and convincingly justified (Benschop and Brouns 2003, 200). Because, the absurdity of the question lies in the implication of the opposite: what *in particular* do men bring to biblical scholarship?

⁵ Huldah means a weasel! For interpretative consequences of the etymology added by the rabbis, see Scheuer, (2015).

Of course, gender matters! But so too does race, sexual orientation, class, social location, and a basic sense of the appropriate. Judith McKinlay's (2013) call for biblical scholars to read in more than one key concerns all the countries of our beautifully diverse, globalised world, not just New Zealand.

In the end, the way I see it, the simple answer to the question of "Why Huldah?" is "because she was there!" The simple answer to the question "Why should women engage in biblical scholarship?" is "because we can."

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