

## **Prophetess Huldah: A Role Model for Women Leadership Inclusion in Nigerian Baptist Convention**

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### **Abstract**

There is a close relationship between the treatment of women in the traditional African and Jewish culture. This treatment is characterized by a limitation or denial as the case may be in leadership roles and it cuts across all human sphere of life. This article examines this kind of treatment, that exist in the Church today from the consideration of the Baptist Denomination referred to as The Nigerian Baptist Convention, using a qualitative research approach with the use of relevant literatures. The paper used Social Construction Theory which builds on the claim that people's assumptions, perceptions, and practices with social phenomenon develop within the matrix of a social context with what is generally accepted as socially valid claims. Hence, social realities are fluid and susceptible to changes as time goes on. The Prophetess Huldah was closely studied in respect to her background and contributions to the nation of Israel during the reign of King Josiah who brought about reformation in the land. Based on findings, Huldah was discovered to have displayed a high sense of responsibility as a woman called by God into the prophetic ministry. She was courageous, a teacher of the law in truth, intercessor with wisdom and insight. Apparently, the study has further established the fact that God's call and leadership role is not limited to the males alone, women are inclusive. Hence, Huldah's contributions as x-rayed are projected to serve as model for women in different leadership roles in the Nigerian Baptist Convention.

**Key Words:** Prophetess, Leadership, Inclusion and The Nigerian Baptist Convention

### **Introduction**

The question of women involvement in the ministry of the church has been long debated. The denial or limitation of women in some leadership roles in the church has however been a concern. Those advocating women inclusion in the leadership of the Church have developed several schools of thought. Jewett (1980:1) summarizes among the many reasons given as lying in "the nature of things, which includes the nature of women, the nature of the ministerial office, and the nature of God himself". From the fact of "the nature of women", men have blamed women for the fall of mankind. Eve was seen as the tempter who led Adam (the man) into sin. Men have heaped this offence on Christian women, thus justifying their own sin of omission in the failure of confessing their own guilt when confronted by God (Gen. 3:11-12).

Again, the mystification of the ministerial office has been another argument. Ordination for example constitutes the church's confirmation of divine call of God to the office. Somebody cannot simply just choose to be a minister. The question is therefore, whether God can call women to be ministers at some level. The advocates of this idea argue that God intended other vocation for women. They based their argument under the shadow of the prevailing sexual biases in the society which were reinforced by the institutionalization of all male hierarchical priesthood. Women however according to James (1993:109) could play other roles such as good wives and mothers, making tea, ushering people, singing in choir, arranging flowers and counseling the youth. This idea only portrayed women as being less than full adults on a par with men.

The other argument that is based on the nature of God, which depicts God as a male with elaborate masculine features. Only a man can therefore receive the order of ministry in the church. The patriarchal societies both in the West and in Africa have thrived on this idea, thus denying women participation in full ministry of the church. Unfortunately; or rather fortunately, this denial was not advocated by Christ. Christ showed that, God's manifestations of knowledge, prophecy, gifts of healing, working of miracles and discerning of spirits can be revealed to the community through a woman as well as a man. This has been portrayed by various women that Christ had dealings with as well as the roles played by women in the Old Testament (Chilver, 1997:58). Uchem (2005:11) alluded to the fact that for many centuries, Christians believed that women's assigned secondary status in relation to men was ordained by God and supported by the Bible. However, awareness has been growing that this is not so and that men and women are in fact, equal and this realization should be translated into action.

Huldah's leadership and prophetic gift has influenced discussion at different levels through ages. Even the early Church used Huldah's prophetic leadership to ordain women to sacred office. She was a woman capable, chosen, and called of the Lord to be His prophetess. She was deemed competent of discerning divine will by King Josiah. Even though there were fewer women prophets than male prophets, this does not indicate that God was compelled to use them because there were no man available, nor were they an exception to the rule. Women prophets, like men, were called and chosen of God at His discretion and in accordance with His will.

The truth is that the Baptist Denomination has aligned with this reality, attempted change of such feeling and has encouraged women participation in leadership. But while some spaces have been open for the female gender, there are still some areas that are closed to women. The aim of this paper is to x-ray the role Huldah played in the Jewish history that can be used as a model for women who are in ministry at present and those yet to come in. The lessons from her will no doubt challenge women leaders to excel in their leadership role. This will also make the denomination reconsider and also open up such areas where women leadership have been limited.

### **Conceptual Framework**

**Prophetess:** The word prophetess (*neviah*) referred to a female prophet. The term 'prophet' is used to mean someone who is able to predict the future. Grabbe (1995) defines a prophetess as "an inspired speaker, under divine constraint or commission, who publicly announces an immediate revelation" (p. 1). According to Oguntoye (2003), "prophets or prophetess in Israel were no mere prognosticators, they were in essence spokesmen of the living word from God" (p. 15). They are perceived to have a special relationship with Yahweh who spoke to them and they proclaimed the revealed word to whom the message was intended.

**Leadership:** There can be definitions of leadership from different perspectives. But for the purpose of this paper it shall be considered as "an activity or set of activities, observable to others, that occurs in a group, organization, or institution involving a leader and followers who willingly subscribe to common purpose and work together to achieve them" (Anthony 2001:408). It is the "ability to influence people to cooperate toward some goals which they find desirable" Ted (1995: 20). Church leadership means and involves knowing the way, the organization or environment of operation, its culture, customs and activities to a definite destination which is goal accomplishing (Iheanyi, 2003: 5).

### **The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC)**

In the view of Ayokunle (2014), "The Nigerian Baptist Convention is a Christian denomination that grew out of the work of The Southern Baptist Convention (USA) in Nigeria which began in 1850" (p.27). The Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC) is one of the Mission Churches in Nigeria alongside the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodists, and others. Southern Baptist Convention a Christian body from the U.S.A, having broken out from the Triennial Convention over issues bordering around slavery, came to Nigeria and founded NBC-considered what was known as 'Central Africa' or 'Sudan' today known as Northern Nigeria as a mission priority area. This decision of the Southern Baptist Convention mission board led to the appointment and commissioning of Thomas Jefferson Bowen on 22 February

1849 to champion the noble cause that metamorphosed into what is now the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC).

**Inclusion:** Inclusion is seen as a universal human right. The aim is to embrace all people irrespective of race, gender, disability, getting rid of discrimination and intolerance. McDonnell, Hardman, and Kiefer-O'Donnell (1995:32) presents the fact that inclusion is not a place ; instead, it is a lifestyle in which a person is an active participant in his or her life, rather than a passive observer and the recipient of decisions someone else has made. To this end, inclusion promotes quality of life.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper adopts the social construction theory, Social construction theory or social constructionism builds on the claim that people's assumptions, perceptions, and practices with social phenomenon develop within the matrix of a social context with what is generally accepted as socially valid claims. Social constructionism is a theory of knowledge that holds that characteristics typically thought to be immutable and solely biological—such as gender, race, class, ability, and sexuality—are products of human definition and interpretation shaped by cultural and historical contexts (Andrews, 2012).

According to the social constructionist perspective, a lot of human beliefs and truth claims are believed not to ensue from objective reality but from subjectivism, since each society names and explains phenomena in terms of its peculiar experiences and environments. This implies that social realities are fluid and susceptible to changes as time goes on. Thus, what one generation holds dear may be repudiated or significantly uttered by subsequent generations in the same society.

### **Huldah as Prophetess and Her Religious Contributions in Israel**

There is a clear indication from the biblical account that God did not limit the call to the prophetic ministry to men alone. The female gender is also called into the ministry. Though, that of the women are non-writing prophets, there are about nine of the prophetess in both the New and Old Testament. These prophetesses are

1. Miriam, the elder sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20)
2. Deborah, a judge in Israel (Judges 4:4)
3. Isaiah's wife was also referred to as a prophetess by her husband (Isaiah 8:3)
4. Anna, the aged Christian lady who was present at the time of dedication of Jesus Christ (Luke 2:36)
5. Four daughters of Evangelist Philip (Acts 21:9)
6. Huldah who prophesied during the reign of the boy king Josiah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22)

Prophetess Huldah's prophetic ministry covered the reign of the boy King Josiah. She is the wife of the keeper of the royal wardrobes Shallum. She lived in the second part of the city of Jerusalem suggested to be "the west of the temple complex in the upper Tyropocon Valley in the commercial quarter" Patterson (1988: 284). Huldah's prophetic gift was not in question knowing that when King Josiah urged Hilkiyah the High priest to inquire of the Lord what is written in the book of the law (2 Kings 22:13), the prophetess was approached by Hilkiyah, Abikam, Achbor and Asaiah, that only Huldah could interpret the significance of Deuteronomy to the devout. King Josiah authenticates her true prophetic office even as she spoke in the style of the classic prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. According to Ogunkunle (2003), Huldah's response "tell the man who sent you to me"(p. 61). in II Kings 22:15. echoes like that of Elijah to Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1 and Isaiah to Hezekiah in 2 Kings 19: 6.

Both Jeremiah and Zephaniah were active as prophets during this time. Yet it was Huldah who was consulted when the king instructed the priest to "inquire of the Lord" as to the meaning of the scroll that had been found during the work of restoration and cleaning in the temple. The regard for Huldah's integrity and authority as a woman made her validation of the recently discovered Book of the Law all that was required for immediate action on the part of the King. Huldah, a deeply devout woman, made her God-given spiritual gifts available to God, and she was obedient and faithful to deliver the word from God to her people. She is also regarded as one of the central prophets in Jerusalem (Ogunkunle, 2003:60).

The prophecy of Huldah was in two parts. The first 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 is eminent because they had forsaken God. The second part of the message was for King Josiah (2 Kings 22:19-20), that he 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 judgment would descend on Judah. Like other prophetess, Huldah played significant role in the life of the people. The roles according to Nwaomah (2003) include; "speaking for God, revelator of God's purpose, strengthening and guiding the rulers, encouraging the people to faithfulness, protesting against evils, directing activities and also teaching, and acting as a counselor to every facets of individual and national life" (p. 69).

The ministry of the prophetess Huldah and others are evidence that women are not disqualified by their gender from such high positions of leadership and they are not exempted from God's call to serve. The behaviour and messages show no significant difference from those among the male prophets. It is obvious that at the period of the operation of the prophetesses, one can perceive some significant in politics and religious contributions. The prophetess displayed exceptional leadership qualities. She knows what she has been called into and remained useful in that area. She was an indispensable figure in the social order of the people. Huldah insists on the practical application of the character of God, that is, His righteousness, holiness and love. Huldah's prophecy made King Josiah to call on the people of Israel to heed God's demand which they left at their amalgamation with the Canaanites.

#### **Huldah as a Model for Women Leadership in the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC)**

Examining biblical models of women in ministry can change our preconceived images of leadership by providing biblically informed reasons for re-investing women with the dignity and high regard God conferred on them in creation and redemption, and by encouraging us to reflect positively on the gifts with which God has endowed women in the past. Such an examination can even challenge our thinking about women's use of initiative and authority in the church and suggest avenues of ministry available to women and men that are both contemporary and innovative. By God's grace, following the faith journeys of others will help to transform our attitudes and behaviour, so that our relationships can better reflect Christ, the one promised to redeem humanity.

The life and ministry of the prophetess Huldah serves as a model for women leadership in the Nigerian Baptist Convention (NBC). Some of these models of note are;

**a. She was a leader with a call:** The advocacy for women participation in ministry does not rule out the fact that there must be a call by God upon the life of women as they engage in ministry. Huldah's ministry reveals that she was called into the prophetic ministry as she demonstrated it through her motivating revival through the King Josiah. Women who are to participate in church leadership should also show their capabilities in preaching, ecclesiastical duties and others as assigned. These will be signs that women can also perform as well as their male counterparts in the ministry of the church. Wamue (1997) echoes same idea by saying that "the ministerial positions held by women in African religiosity should act as indicator of their role and place in God's creation" (p. 60).

Trible, (1985) remarks that "she places her stamp of approval on the content as truly from the Lord" (p. 9). For the first time in the history (this is recorded), the writing of a woman was read and been declared to be scripture. Swidler (1978) notes "the authority to pass judgement on this initial entry into the canon was given to a woman" (p. 173). The church as a company of God's people in an attempt of manifesting its calling to be redemptive, need to incorporate all human beings and provide a conducive environment for the manifestation and development of the various giftedness through the call of God.

**b. She was Courageous:** She was bold to confront the people with their life of violating the rules of God and of their forefathers. She never held back the clear message of impending judgment of God if they refuse to repent and turn to Him. The moral aspect is worth mentioning. The prophecy of Huldah raised the moral standard of the people. Following her prophecy to Josiah the king, he immediately took some steps to lead them to revival in the land. The first major step was the reading of

the book of the law to the hearing of the people where they all renewed their covenant with God. Josiah the king therefore led in the reformation in the land and temple. King Josiah was the last in the history of Judah to be described as the reformer of Israel that brought about “a total purge of all non-Yahwistic cults and practices”.

**She was a Teacher of the Law in Truth:** The church in recognizing the existing capabilities of women lies with the church’s teachers and preachers. Huldah as a good teacher interpreted the law and also clearly revealed to the people the mind of God. This stirred revival not only in the life of the King but also the entire people of Israel. The teachers should teach and preach positive attitudes, biases should be identified, taught against and so eliminated. The church community should also be taught to counter the conditioning of religious women to docility and servitude roles. Armas and Faith (2021) observes that “ Huldah’s prophetic words shifted national policy” (p. 68-69). Her commitment to telling God’s truth even and especially the hard truth specifically to men in power, changed the course of history. Some in the Church tell women that they cannot lead men, and they use the Bible to support their claim, But what about Huldah? She was called to tell the truth.

**c. She was an Intercessor:** As Miriam frames the Exodus narrative, so Deborah and Huldah framed Deuteronomistic history (Joshua through 2 Kings). Deborah appears at the beginning in Judges and Huldah at the end in 2 Kings. Both women declared God’s word to leaders who responded. Unfortunately by Huldah’s time the nation had gone so far into idolatry that exile was virtually inevitable, so there would be no songs of victory as in the days of Deborah. Her words did compel the king to continue in his reforms and perhaps held the tide for a few more years. Huldah as a mediator and intercessor standing between life and death changed the spiritual atmosphere at her time.

**d. She Demonstrated Wisdom and Insight:** Huldah inspired women in the nineteenth century, such as the Calvinist Elizabeth Stanton, who helped publish the woman’s Bible, one of the first attempts by women to evaluate the Judeo-Christian legacy’s impact on women. It states “Her wisdom and insight” were well known to Josiah the King; and when the wise men came to him with the “Book of the Law”, to learn what was written therein, King Josiah ordered them to take it to Huldah, as neither the wise men nor King Josiah himself could interpret its contents. It is fair to suppose that there was not a man at court who could read the book; hence the honour devolved upon Huldah (Stanton, 1985: 80-81)). She seized opportunities and turned them into authentic roles: she was able to do this which served the system in which she worked. Huldah is a biblical character from who we can learn. She was not afraid to speak out, to say unpopular things or initiate radical transformation.

## Conclusion

The discussion on Huldah’s role as a prophetess in Israel has established the reality that both men and women who are created by God in His image and likeness are called by God for specific ministries and for leadership roles in our churches. The fact that there exist more men in church leadership does not limit God in using women. Women in leadership should therefore be encouraged to fully exercise their giftedness.

Huldah and other notable women in the Bible present suitable role models for women today in leadership roles in the Nigeria Baptist Convention. The strengths demonstrated by Huldah should be good lessons:

- i. Of the giftedness of women like their male counterparts.
- ii. That God still calls women in ministry and expects them to function with dignity that they are called by God.
- iii. That women in leadership should be sensitive to the leading of God and be bold to exercise the authority attached to their leadership position.
- iv. That men should see women in leadership not as rivals but partners for the fulfillment of God’s purpose for His church.
- v. That women in leadership should seek to bring about revival or reformation in their area of ministry. They should do ministry with diligence to please God who called them and others who are to affirm their leadership roles in the church.



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