Prophetess of Doom.
Hermeneutical Reflections on the Huldah Oracle

I. Introduction

Ever since the publication of Martin Noth's "Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien" in 1943[1] the Book of Kings has been considered by German scholarship to be, to a large extent, the literary contiguous work of a single author, who by using older source material crafted it around the middle of the 6th Century BC as an integral part of a larger narrative contained within the books of Deuteronomy to 2 Kings. Noth maintained the theological leitmotif, which constitutes the internal cohesion of the entire work, as a result of a Deuteronomy-oriented, historo-theological reflection about the causes that led to the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem and its sanctuary by the Babylonians in the year 586 BC. To put it simply: The Deuteronomistic History offers an "etiology of doom" of both the Kingdom of Judah and Israel.

Gerhard von Rad[2] raised some early objections about the reconstruction of the *intentio operis* of the Deuteronomistic History, as conducted by Noth. He was followed by Hans Walter Wolff, who also found it necessary to further differentiate the "Kerygma" of the Deuteronomistic History, conflicting with both Noth and von Rad[3]. However, it was first Frank Moore Cross, who seized onto the observations made by von Rad and revived the notions already presented by Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen, which make distinctions between a late pre-exilic and pro-dynastic foundation in the Book of Kings and a readaptation from the age of the exile.[4] In the aftermath, both models of explanation were expanded and modified, without reaching a sustainable consensus with regards to the linguistic and theological characteristics of the deuteronomistic historiography.[5]

In light of the complex state of discussions and the recently-increasing, general challenge to the Nothian hypothesis of an all-encompassing deuteronomistic narrative work[6], it is recommended to initially debate the editorial and historical problems of the Book of Kings independently of this model. However, it may still make sense to speak of a "Deuteronomistic

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[1] Cf. M. Noth, Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien. Die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke des Alten Testaments, Halle 1943 (Tübingen [2]1957)

[2] Cf. G. von Rad, Die deuteronomistische Geschichtstheologie in den Königsbüchern, in: ders., Deuteronomium-Studien, FRLANT 58, Göttingen 1947, 52-64.

[3] Cf. H.W. Wolff, Das Kerygma des deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerks, ZAW 73 (1961), 171-186.

[4] Cf. F.M. Cross, The Themes of the Book of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History, in: ders., Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic. Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel, Cambridge / London 1973, 274-289.

[5] The so-called "Göttinger Modell" has to be mentioned here, which was a subsequent development of a basic study by Rudolf Smend and was further developed primarily by Walter Dietrich and Timo Veijola. It assumes that the basic exilic setting of the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH) was expanded through comprehensive editorial updates (cf. R. Smend, Die Entstehung des Alten Testaments, ThW 1, Stuttgart et al. 1978). – Other redaction-critical attempts point in a somewhat different direction, based primarily on the regnal formulas in the Book of Kings, in identifying multiple (pre-exilic) levels of growth, cf. H. Weippert, Die deuteronomistische Beurteilung der Könige von Israel und Juda und das Problem der Redaktion der Königsbücher, Bib. 53 (1972), 301-339; B. Halpern / D.S. Vanderhooft, The Editions of Kings in the 7th-6th Centuries B.C.E., HUCA 62 (1991), 179-244. Recent criticism of these attempts has been brought up by E. Aurelius, Zukunft jenseits des Gerichts. Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zum Enneateuch, BZAW 319, Berlin / New York 2003, 21-70.

[6] Cf. the various articles in the anthologies of A. de Pury / T. Römer / J.D. Macchi (eds.), Israel Constructs Its History. Deuteronomistic Historiography as Understood in Recent Research, JSOT.S 306, Sheffield 2000 and M. Witte u.a. (eds.), Die deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerke. Redaktions- und religionsgeschichtliche Perspektiven zur »Deuteronomismus«-Diskussion in Tora und Vorderen Propheten, BZAW 365, Berlin / New York 2006.

History" on a certain level of the literary development, but it should no longer be used as an editorial framework for the study of the Book of Kings. Instead, a careful analysis of as many individual texts as possible is needed, in order to obtain the most authentic picture of the literary history of the Book of Kings.[7]

In view of the aforementioned controversy the literary analysis of the account on the Reform of King Jusiah in 2 Kings 22-23 plays a key role in determining the original conclusion and the intention of the Book of Kings. Within the account of the events in the 18th year of the king, the Huldah Oracle (2 Kings 22:15-20) again plays a central role in the historo-theological hermeneutics of the overall narrative. Because the literary analysis and editorial and historical categorization of this text is disputed, the parts to follow will first investigate the compositional structure of the account in 2 Kings 22:11-20 and its literary coherence, before subsequently delving further into the relationship of the Huldah Oracle to the actual account of the reform in chapter 23.

II. Position and Function of the Huldah Oracle in 2 Kings 22-23

1. Scope of the Text and Compositional Structure of the Huldah Oracle

Generally, the account of King Josiah's *res gestae* is broken down into two main parts: the narrative of the Torah document (ch. 22) and the account of Josiah's reform in chapter 23.[8] Within the first main section, a further differentiation can be made between the "account of the discovery of the Torah document" (V. 3-10) and the questioning of Yahweh initiated by the king himself (V. 11-20).

In this respect, the king's reaction to the reading of the Torah document in V. 11 is generally viewed as the conclusion of the first scene. This assumption is grounded on the observation that the phrase wayyᵉsaw hammælæk in V. 12 introduces a new narrative sequence and that the inventory of persons in the text is altered with the mentioning of the royal delegation. However, Christof Hardmeier drew attention to the fact that the temporal marker wayyᵉhî kišmoaʻ places the incident of the rending of garments (wayyiqraʻ ʼæt bᵉgadâw) in a chronologically marked relationship with the subsequent inquiry of God; therefore, bringing both plots syntactically very close to one another.[9] Hardmeier's syntactic argumentation can be strengthened by semantic and pragmatic observations. On semantic grounds the roots šāmaʻ and dābar play a central role for the conceptual coherence of the text (cf. V. 11.13.18.19.). Using pragmatic hindsight, it should be remembered that the symbolism of rending garments refers to the current situation of emergency, which prompts the questioning of Yahweh. That said, it is not improper to consider V. 11 a narrative signal for the deployment of a new scene and the introduction of the Huldah Oracle.

The Huldah Oracle is introduced through the assignment of a royal delegation regarding the obtainment of a prophetic inquiry of Yahweh (V. 11-14). Furthermore, the assignment is not only connected to the different parts of the oracle by several cross-references (e.g. šāmaʻ, dib-rê hassepær, yāsat + hāmāh, dāraš ʼæt yhwh), it also displays its double-sided nature[10] right

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[7] The matter of the recent controversy over the determination of the relationship between Masoretic text and the text form of the Septuagint in the Book of Kings cannot be discussed here, cf. my thoughts on the matter in M. Pietsch, Von Königen und Königtümern. Eine Untersuchung zur Textgeschichte der Königsbücher, ZAW 119 (2007), 39-58.

[8] This breakdown is motivated by a change in the inventory of persons (e.g. the disappearance of Schafan the scribe), as well as differences in style between chapters 22 and 23 (cf. narrative suspense, use of direct speech).

[9] Cf. C. Hardmeier, König Joschija in der Klimax des DtrG (2Reg 22f.) und das vordtr. Dokument einer Kultreform am Residenzort (23,4-15*), in: R. Lux (ed.), Erzählte Geschichte. Beiträge zur narrativen Kultur im alten Israel, BThSt 40, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2000, 89-145 (102).
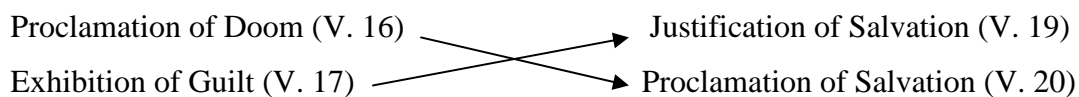
[10] It is debated, whether or not the third member of the series ûbᵉʻad kål yehûdāh is original, or if it was added later. Independent of the answer to this question, the structural correspondent between V. 13 and the Huldah Oracle exists because the third element of the sequence only creates an explanatory addendum to the second element (cf. H.D. Hoffmann, Reform und Reformen. Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung, AThANT 66, Zürich 1980, 190 Anm.2).

from the beginning of address: "for me and for the people" (baʿadî ubeʿad hāʿām). The oracle itself is composed of two largely parallel, individual sayings, which are again bound to each other by a number of cross-references, as well as by a literary context, creating a compositional entity. The parallel structures of both sayings illustrate themselves in their respective opening formulas in V. 15-16* and V. 18*.

$$\text{(לא) אמ׳׳כ אלע-רשא שיאל} \qquad \text{ורמא}$$
$$\text{הכ ׳תרמא ׳לאל} \qquad \text{אמ׳׳כ הלע הוה׳ כלמ-לאו}$$

The introductory formula ʾimrû and toʾmerû and the (expanded) indication of addressors, which are chiastically related to one another, correspond to each other in a functional manner. This is followed, respectively, by the citation or messenger formula (koh ʾāmar yhwh), which characterizes the words of the oracle as divine speech. The individual irregularities can be explained by the difference in the particular perspective of each saying in combination with the double-sided form of address for when the oracle is either addressing the people (V. 15-17) or the king (V. 18-20).[11]

The configurations of both oracle phrases, which are bound to the form of a prophetic word of judgment and a prophetic proclamation of salvation, also display a recognizable chiastic structure. While the first part of the oracle employs the proclamation of doom against the people (V. 16), upon which the justification is added in V. 17, the second part of the oracle reveals the justification (V. 19) and the word of salvation for the king concludes the composition (V. 20a).

Proclamation of Doom (V. 16)   Justification of Salvation (V. 19)

Exhibition of Guilt (V. 17)   Proclamation of Salvation (V. 20)

2. The Literary Coherence of the Huldah Oracle

Previous observations have shown that the Huldah Oracle has an ornate and self-contained design. Nevertheless, repeated attempts have been made by scholars to differentiate between an older basis and a later expansion within the Huldah Oracle. The origin of these deliberations is, on the one hand, the conspicuous double-sided structure of the text[12] and on the other hand, the observation of suspense and disruption within the text, both formal and in terms of content.[13] This was how Walter Dietrich in his analysis of the Huldah Oracle was able to asses the parallel structure and formulation of the introductory formula in V. 15-16* and V. 18* as literary critical evidence, which refers back to the methodological principle of "resumption"[14], and thus decided that the oracle's first statement should be added secondarily. That the subsequent word of salvation and its justification is, at any rate, still closely connected to the preceding word of judgment (cf. the cross-references to V. 16 in V. 19a and V. 20a), has been proven to have been written by the same person. Dietrich maintains that the sole original core

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[11] This refers, on the one hand, to the different levels of communication in the text and, on the other hand, to the different indicators of the royal addressor: once as ʾîš and the other time as mælæk yehûdāh, cf. Hardmeier, König, 112.

[12] Cf. C. Levin, Josia im Deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk, in: ders., Fortschreibungen. Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament, BZAW 316, Berlin / New York 2003, 198-216 (210f.).

[13] Cf. the detailed literary critical analyses by F. Horst, Die Kultusreform des Königs Josia (II. Rg. 22-23), ZDMG 77 (1923), 220-238 und H. Spieckermann, Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit, FRLANT 129, Göttingen 1982, 60-71.

[14] Vgl. dazu C. Kuhl, Die »Wiederaufnahme« ein literarkritisches Prinzip?, ZAW 64 (1952), 1-11

of the older oracle continues to be the anacoluthon in V. 18b*, which on its own remains incomprehensible.[15]

However, Dietrich's argument raises the basic question as to how far a formulaic language, as seen in the case of both speech introductions in V. 15-16* and V. 18*, can still be taken as an indicator of a significant "resumption" in terms of literary criticism. In my opinion, this is where the capabilities of the literary-critical analysis go to their very limits. This becomes even more true, as the double-sided structure of the Huldah Oracle represents a constitutive structural element of the text, which is due to the historo-theological reflection of the author. The first part of the oracle can therefore not be excluded as a secondary, Deuteronomistic interpretation from the original text composition; instead, right from the start, it creates a framework for interpretation for the second part of the oracle, which is gathered not only from the cross-reference to the calamitous message in V. 19a, but it also (and most importantly) creates a framework around the two-part oracle directly from the verbal revision of the phrase mebî' rā'āh 'al hammāqôm hazzæh from V. 16b in V. 20.[16]

A further objection often brought up against the literary uniformity of the Huldah Oracle uncovers the discrepancy between the proclamation of a nonviolent death of the king in V. 20a and his violent fate, as reported in the death notice in 2 Kgs 23:29-30a.[17] This tension points to the idea that the original Huldah Oracle simply received a word of salvation regarding the king, which had to have been formulated during Josiah's lifetime. In this case, the main problem concerns the interpretation of the expression bᵉšālôm: Is the phrase targeting a nonviolent death of the king, as the parallel uses of the expression in Jer 34:4 and 1 Kgs 2:6.(9) suggest or is V. 20a making a statement about the honorable burial of the king and is therefore not in conflict with the notice about his violent death at Megiddo?[18]

The defining clue to answering this question lies, in my opinion, in the threefold structure of the proclamation of salvation itself.

After the typical introduction through lāken, the proclamation initially continues that Yahweh will gather the king "to his fathers" (hinnᵉnî + participle, cf. V. 16). The expression, whose next parallel is found in Jud 2:10[19], is singular in the Old Testament in using Yahweh as the subject of the gathering and serves here as an announcement of Josiah's death (cf. Gen 49:29; Num 20:24; 27:13; 31:2). More important, however, is the observation that the root 'sp in the Book of Kings has no other connection to death or burial notices and cannot be understood in this context as an allusion to a nonviolent death of the king. Moreover, in the death and burial

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[15] Cf. W. Dietrich, Prophetie und Geschichte. Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum deuteronomistischen Geschichtswerk, FRLANT 108, Göttingen 1972, 55-58.

[16] Cf. the compositional structure of the oracle, also in Hardmeier, König, 109.

[17] Cf. Cross, Themes, 286 n. 46; J. Gray, I&II Kings. A Commentary, OTL, London ³1977, 713; J.A. Montgomery / H.S. Gehman, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Kings, ICC, Edinburgh 1951, 526.545f.; M. Cogan / H. Tadmor, II Kings. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AncB 11, New York u.a. 1988, 295; Halpern / Vanderhooft, Editions, 223-229.

[18] Cf. for discussion Hoffmann, Reform.

[19] It is only in these two parts where the construction of 'sp + 'b (pl.) + preposition meet (cf. Halpern / Vanderhooft, Editions, 223.226f.). The typical usage, primarily found in the priestly portions of the Pentateuch, is 'sp + 'm + preposition ('l). In 2 Kgs 22:20, the unusual formulation can supposedly be traced back to a mixed form of both of sayings: „to be placed with one's fathers" (škb + 'bt + 'm, cf. 2 Sam 7:12.) and „to be gathered to your ancestors" ('sp + 'm + 'l / 'l).

notices in the Book of Kings the natural death of a king is expressed by the recurring phrase wayyiškab NN ‘im ’abotâw (cf. 1 Kgs 2:10; 11:43; 14:20.31), which is evidently avoided here[20]. The unusual formulation in V. 20 results, rather, with the intention of imparting the word of salvation to the king regarding the account of his violent death at Megiddo, i.e. it presupposes the event.

This assumption is confirmed in both of the elements that follow in the message sequence. The second element is built upon the proclamation of the death of the king (’sp, nif.) in adding a burial notice. The lack of semantic identity between the two statements despite the common root ’sp is revealed through a change in the stem modification (qal / nif.), which suggests a change of agent (cf. 23:30a), as well as by the prepositional adverbial phrase ’æl qibrotêkā, which switches the meaning of the statement from the death of the king to his burial.[21]

What is the meaning conveyed by the expression bešālôm in this context? The last element of the proclamation could help us to answer this question: "Your eyes will not see the calamity (bekol harāʿāh) that I will bring upon this place". This explicit recourse to the proclamation of doom in V. 16 makes it clear that the meaning of the statement lies therein that Yahweh's inevitable doom will not take place during Josiah's lifetime; but rather, that the king has been spared the wrathful judgment of God on the grounds of his humility before Yahweh (cf. V. 19). If one takes into account the close relationship between the proclamation of doom in V. 16-17 and V. 19* with the prophetic message contained in the Book of Jeremiah it becomes evident, that the prophetess is announcing the final destruction of Jerusalem and its sanctuary. Against this background the intention of the Huldah Oracle could be stated more precisely that the king is spared the fate of his successors (with the exception of Jehoiakim), who shall die outside of the country and shall not be placed in the royal burial grounds – a fate considered to be extremely unlucky in all of the Ancient Near East (cf. 2 Sam 21:10ff.; Jer 22:10ff.).[22] Therein – and only therein – can the word of salvation for the king be found, which, in turn, essentially refers to the judgment passed against the people. This correlation is then underlined, as the expression bešālôm in the third element is incorporated into the unusual phrase (rāʾah) bekol harāʿāh, which effectively creates the antonym to bešālôm (cf. Jer 34:4f.; 1 Kgs 2:6.9) and helps to identify the content of the expression.

To summarize, it can be ascertained that there are no adequate reasons, to divide the existing text of the Huldah Oracle into various literary layers.

3. The Relationship of the Huldah Oracle to the Reform Account (2 Kgs 23*)

Scholars have long noticed that the Huldah Oracle, which ultimately contains the irrevocable proclamation of the divine wrath against the Kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem, does not fit in well with the subsequent reform measures of the king, which were barely initiated due to said proclamation. How does one explain the idiosyncratic behavior of the king, given the knowledge of the oracle's notification? In my view two observations are decisive in this case: First, the Huldah Oracle reveals in at least one instance, that its author literarily implied the reform account in chapter 23, in other words, the obtainment of the oracle was inserted secondarily into the context of the narrative. In combination with the proclamation of doom, it is stated in V.16b that Yahweh "will bring about all words/instructions of the writing (regarding this place and its residents) proclaimed by the king of Judah (qāraʾ)". This formulation anticipates the self-obligation of the king (and the people) in regards to the Torah document in 2 Kgs

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[20] Cf. I.W. Provan, Hezekiah and the Book of Kings, BZAW 172, Berlin / New York 1988, 149 n. 53.

[21] It is possible that the formulation of the burial notice in 23:30 hints that Josiah has been entombed „in his grave (biqburātô)".

[22] Does the statement of „being gathered to one's ancestors" also hint at this aspect? This could be the case, if you can assume that there was a comparable place of worship for the royal ancestry, as was the case in Northern Syria and the coastal region (cf. Ugarit, Qatna et al.).

23:1-3. Whereby, as a matter of fact, it is said that the king exclaimed (qāra') the words/instructions of the Torah document for the ears of the people to hear (V. 2b). In other words, the proclamation of doom against the people was justified under the allusion of the self-obligation of the people in regards to the Torah document, whose words/instructions were not heeded. It is for this reason that the wrath of Yahweh cannot be calmed and that the foretold doom cannot be revoked (cf. V. 17). By these means, it is also made quite clear that the Huldah Oracle is also unable to bring about a reversal, i.e. sparing the people from the judgment. The author is looking back at the events from a location "jenseits des Gerichts".

The second observation relates to the narratological function of the Huldah Oracle within the overall composition of the narrative. It stands out that the Huldah Oracle does not play a decisive role in the progress of the plot. If one were to remove the obtainment of the oracle from the narrative, then there is a smooth connection from the reading of the Torah documents to the king (cf. 22:10) to the account of the reform. The self-obligation of the king and his people in regards to the Torah document and the subsequent rearrangement of the cult performance in the temple in Jerusalem and within Judah's landscape, which were concluded through the Passover celebration, are the consequences of the words and instructions of the Torah document.[23] In contrast, the Huldah Oracle together with its introduction has been introduced due to a later historo-theological reflection, and was not an original component of Josiah's *res gestae*. The Huldah Oracle does not serve to inaugurate the king's reform politics – and it never did – rather, it looked to solve the historo-theological aporia, which emerged from an exilic perspective of the reform politics of King Josiah on the one hand and through the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar II, on the other hand.

Therein, his intention also touches upon the supposed (and equally secondary) historo-theological reflection in the appraisal of the king in 23:26-27, which draws parallels between the downfall of Judah with the fate of the northern kingdom of Israel and substantiates the "Sins of Manasseh" (cf. 2 Kgs 21:10ff.; 24:3f.20).

If one takes together the literary and conceptual observations, this suggests the presumption that the Huldah Oracle acts as a later extension, one that re-interprets an older, pre-exilic account of King Josiah's government under the impact of the exile.

III. Conclusion

If the observations that I have sketched out turn out to be correct, then it will lead to two other initial questions concerning the editorial history of the Book of Kings. First, it can be contested that the composition-critical analysis of the text has yielded no evidence for the acceptance of an older, pre-exilic version of the Huldah Oracle, so that the wording of the oracle cannot be valued as a clue to any redaction or composition of the Book of Kings, or the Deuteronomistic History respectively, in the time of King Josiah, as has been asserted by Frank Moore Cross and others. However, the Huldah Oracle has proven to be more of an exilic extrapolation of an older text, which hermeneutically reflects the events of the irrevocable judgment of Yahweh.

If the secondary character of the Huldah Oracle (and the king's appraisal in 23:25-27) is recognized, it results in a continuous narrative thread, in which no hint of an impending catastrophe can be found. To the contrary, the text paints a picture that is deeply rooted in the institutional and religious requirements of the latter part of the Judahite kingdom and points to a late, pre-exilic version of the Book of Kings. This assumption, which is based on a detailed compositional analysis of the account in 2 Kgs 22-23, can be further sustained, to my mind,

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[23] The king is thus shown as an ideal and a role model, in that he accepts the acts of the plot demands set in place by the Torah allows their specific ordinances to come into realization.

by an analysis of a multitude of other individual texts in the Books of Samuel and Kings, which point towards the same literary conception.

Whether or not the creation of this work can be attributed to the era of Josiah or perhaps rather to the time thereafter, which seems more likely to me, cannot be debated here. The same holds true for the question of the intention of the work and possible precursors or source materials[24]. In this sense, the former, in my opinion, is less of a reward and propaganda scheme of King Josiah and his "imperialistic politics" – for which there are few solid historical arguments, but rather more of a warning that his successors (Jehoiakim, Zedekiah) were meant to answer. This type of characterization of the work has parallels in some Mesopotamic Chronicles, under which the so-called Weidner-Chronicle can be mentioned here, especially with its insistence on the concerns of Babylon and the veneration of Marduk located there.

In conclusion, it remains to be said, that even if the Huldah Oracle cannot be used as the key for the reconstruction of the editorial history of the Book of Kings, it offers, however, an allusion to its multi-level development history, which is of great importance especially with regard to the differentiation between a late pre-exilic version of Samuel and Kings an its re-editing in the time of the exile.

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[24] Cf. with the thoughts of Weippert (see note 5); Halpern / Vanderhooft (see note 5) or W. Schniedewind, The Problem with Kings. Recent Study of the Deuteronomistic History, RStR 22 (1996), 22-27.