

Haftarah

'O LORD, my strength and my stronghold'



Blessed are they who trust in the LORD, whose trust is in the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

Jeremiah 17:7-8

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Jeremiah 16:19—17:14) accompanies the Torah portion *Behukotai*: Leviticus 26:3—27:34.
- Both readings highlight the choice which faces Israel. Choose God and Israel will be blessed.

Background

This Haftarah is comprised of a series of diverse statements by Jeremiah from sometime in the late 7th to early 6th century BCE. Jeremiah lived during the period of Babylonian exile although he himself was not deported, but at one point he was forcibly taken to Egypt which is where he most probably saw out his last days.

Things to ponder

- The reading opens with a prophecy of hope for the nations of the world: they will recognize the uselessness of their pagan gods and turn instead to the Living God. This hope and promise that Israel's God will one day find universal recognition beyond Israel (who bears witness to God) is an important and recurring theme in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- This is followed by strong words against the sin of Judah *'written with an iron pen'* (17:1), engraved upon hearts. Although bearers of God's revelation, God's chosen people come in for some harsh criticism by the prophet. The choice is starkly put: draw strength from mere mortals (17:5) and *'be recorded in the underworld'* (17:13) or *'trust in the LORD'* (17:7) and put down roots in flowing streams.
- The image of the *tree* features in this reading. We read of the idolatrous practices that occur *'beside every green tree'* (17:2) and the heart turned from God which amounts to *'a shrub in the desert'* (17:6). This is contrasted with the one who trusts in the LORD who is like a fruitful *'tree planted by water'* (17:7-8).
- For Jeremiah, trust in God has the power to transform the spirit and generate ever-new life and fruitfulness. To choose anything but *'the fountain of living water'* (17:13) is pure folly.
- The reading closes with Jeremiah's prayer: *'Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved'* (17: 14).

Reflection

This Haftarah has a number of thought-provoking sayings conducive to prayer; e.g., 16:19, 16:20; 17:7-8, 9, 14. Choose a verse that especially speaks to you and spend some time praying it, in the company of Jeremiah and the Lord.

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Sarna, ed., *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarat* (Philadelphia, 2001). Scripture quotations: Plaut.