

Haftarah

'Why did your bull not stand?'



Why has Apis fled?
Why did your bull not stand?
—because the Lord thrust him
down.
Your multitude stumbled and fell,
and one said to another,
“Come, let us go back to our own
people
and to the land of our birth,
because of the destroying sword.”

Jeremiah 46:15-16

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Jeremiah 46:13-28) accompanies the Torah portion *Bo*: Exodus 10:1—13:16.
- The Torah portion tells of Pharaoh's defeat by God, with Moses acting as God's agent. In the Haftarah the prophet predicts another defeat for Egypt, this time by Babylon.

Background

- Recall that this Haftarah reflects a time in history when the Israelite kingdom of Judah lay between two super-powers: Egypt and Babylon.
- In 609 BCE Egypt conquers Judah at the battle of Megiddo. But Egypt's victory is shortlived in the face of Babylonian aggression. Shortly after 605 BCE, Jerusalem comes under Babylonian control.
- Against his will and better judgment, Jeremiah accompanies a group of Jews who flee to Egypt. Far from seeing Egypt as a safe-haven, Jeremiah predicts a comprehensive defeat for Egypt at the hands of Babylon. As history eventually unfolded, Egypt was invaded by Babylon, but it was not conquered.

Ponder

- *'Why has Apis fled?' (v.15) [JPS translation: 'Why are your stalwarts swept away?']* Apis was a bull-deity worshipped in Egypt, especially at the city of Memphis. Note how the prophet taunts the Egyptians.
- *'From the north' (v. 20)*. The threat to Egypt comes from Babylon which lies to the east, however to avoid crossing the desert Babylonian troops had to march north along the Euphrates river before turning south.
- *'More numerous than locusts' (v. 23)*. An image evoking memory of the plague of locusts that afflicted Pharaoh in the Exodus story.
- *'The Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel' (v. 25)*. From this prophetic perspective the God of Israel is the universal Lord of all history.
- *'Afterward Egypt shall be inhabited as in the days of old' (v. 26)*. The doom predicted for Egypt is not total obliteration; restoration is possible.
- *'Have no fear, my servant Jacob' (v. 27)*. The people are urged to stand firm in hope. The Haftarah ends on a consoling note. Even when the Lord chastizes his people, it is out of love.

Reflect

The prophet sees the hand of God in the events of history. When we are in the midst of tumultuous events it is often difficult to see the hand of God because of the pain and suffering and uncertainty involved. Share your response to this statement. How does Jeremiah speak to your 'today'?

Bibliography: *Harper Collins Study Bible: NRSV* (NY, 1993); Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Sarna, ed., *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarah* (Philadelphia, 2001). Scripture quotations: NRSV.