

Haftarah

'I am their inheritance...'



They are to teach My people the difference between the holy and the common, and let them know how to tell the clean from the unclean.

Ezekiel 44:23

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Ezekiel 44:15-31) accompanies the Torah portion *Emor*: Leviticus 21:1-24:23.
- The priesthood and priestly duties form the connecting theme for both readings.

Background

Ezekiel was a Zadokite priest who received his calling as a prophet while in exile in Babylon. He had been deported along with thousands of other exiles following the first Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 597 BCE. His prime audience was his fellow Jews in exile. During a period of great suffering and despair his description of priestly service in the new Temple (the first Temple having been destroyed in 587 BCE) may have reinforced the people's hopes of eventual resoration to their land.

Points of note

- *'They alone may enter My sanctuary...'* (44:15). The Haftarah begins with Ezekiel stipulating that in future only the descendents of Zadok are to serve as priests in the Temple. Zadok ben Ahitub was a great supporter of King David when the king faced rebellion from within his own family. Hence the Zadokites are declared by Ezekiel as the only legitimate priestly lineage. The Zadokites were from the tribe of Levi.
- *'They are not to make themselves unclean by coming into contact with a dead body'* (44:25). The word *tamei* ('unclean') refers to a state of *ritual* purity and does not have our common meaning of 'dirty'. Plaut explains that 'touching a corpse was equivalent to having come too close to the mystery of death, and required special ablution' (p. 302). However the rule is suspended for close relatives.
- *'I am their inheritance'* (44:28). The tradition that the Levitical priests had no land holdings is found in Numbers 18:20-24 and Joshua 13:14; 18:17. In Num.18:20 God is described as being the priests' portion and possession. In non-priestly contexts, Israel is described as the Lord's own portion (Deut.32:9).

Reflection

Ezekiel's words are about establishing right order, a cultic system which is workable and justified by tradition and the lessons learned from past experiences. His words come at a time of chaos and loss for his audience of exiles who are without homeland and Temple. Reflect on the task of establishing religious systems that are faithful to tradition and responsive to the times. [Hint: don't just think of the Vatican, think of your own home!]

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