

Haftarah

'Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob...'



Divine questions posed to a sinful people:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me that they went far from me? (2:5)

Has a nation changed its gods? (2:11)

Is Israel a slave? Why then has he become plunder? (2:14)

How can you say, 'I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals'? (2:23)

Jeremiah 2:5,11,14, 23

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Sarna, ed., *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002). Scripture quotations: NRSV.

Connection

This week's Haftarah (Jeremiah 2:4-28; 3:4) has no connecting theme with the Torah portion. Rather, this Haftarah is the second of three haftarot (plural of *haftarah*) that are usually read in the weeks leading up to *Tisha B'Av*, a major fast day in the Jewish calendar commemorating the destruction of the Temple. Together they are known as the 'three [haftarot] of affliction'.

Background

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of a terrible destruction which he associates with the failings of the Israelites to live according to God's ways. This link between an unfaithful people and a God who punishes is a common theme in the bible which of course needs to be interpreted. Mainstream Jews and Christians do not believe in a vengeful God who wills destruction of human life. At the same time the prophecy contains a strong reminder that our actions (and inaction) have consequences. With freewill comes a great responsibility to serve God and one another in love and justice.

Jeremiah is thought to be speaking in the final decades prior to the Babylonian conquest of Judah and the deportation of its people.

Points to note

- The Haftarah opens with God's accusations, first against 'your fathers' (ancestors), and then against the present generation and their descendents (2:5,9). What are they charged with? Ingratitude, apostasy. God's goodness to Israel is recounted; the desert is contrasted to the God-given land (2:6-7). Yet God's gift of a fruitful land it is defiled by sin.
- Jeremiah abhors the indifference of the priests. They don't even seek the Lord (2:8). Even pagans are more faithful to their empty gods than Israel to the Living God! (2:10-11) The heavens shake with horror! (2:12)
- Israel's poor choices are likened to preferring cracked cisterns to the 'Fountain of Living waters' (2:13). Continue to ponder the variety of images employed by Jeremiah to accuse the people of their sins... lack of water, slavery, yoke and bonds, wild vine, soap and stains, wild animals, unshod feet, city ruins, disgraced thief, harlot...
- Some commentators see the 'valley' in 2:23 as a reference to the Valley of Ben-Hinnom where child sacrifice took place.
- The Haftarah closes with a thread of hope as Jeremiah recalls that Israel once cried out 'My Father, Friend of my youth!' (3:4).

Ponder & pray

The anguished speech of the prophet Jeremiah forms a living parable of God's painful disbelief at the sight of a sinful people. Can you identify with such anguish, faced with the sin and suffering in the world around you?

In what way does the prophet challenge you and call you to change?