

Haftarah

'Could such a thing happen?'



Now there were four leprous men outside the city gate, who said to one another, "Why should we sit here until we die? If we say, 'Let us enter the city,' the famine is in the city, and we shall die there; but if we sit here we shall also die."

2 Kings 7:3 -4

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (2 Kings 7:3-20) accompanies the Torah portion *Metzarah*: Leviticus 14:1-15:33.
- Both readings deal with skin diseases/leprosy.

The story

The political alliances and events described in today's Haftarah are considered by scholars to have no historical basis but rather are colorful details in a religious story highlighting the status of Elisha the wonder-worker. As the story opens four lepers are weighing up their chances of survival during a siege of the northern kingdom of Israel which is at war with Aram (Syria). Finding themselves on the periphery of their own society, the four lepers decide to take their chances by seeking refuge in the Aramean camp, knowing full well that they risk being put to death. However when they reach the camp they find an extraordinary situation: a 'ghost camp' as the Arameans have fled, leaving the entire camp intact.

Things to ponder

- The miracle: the Lord has caused the Arameans to hear the sounds of a large army bearing down upon them, hence they flee in fear. (7:6-7)
- In fact the only real approach to the Aramean camp is that of four lepers! Is this a cooperative effort; does the miracle come about through the power of God *and* the risk-taking of four vulnerable people?
- The response of the lepers upon reaching camp (7:8-10): initially they use the situation solely to their own advantage, then consider their responsibility to alert their king and their people. Although they live on the periphery of their society they bring good news back to Israel.
- The miraculous news seems too good to be true. The king is suspicious and decides to test it for an enemy trap (7:12-15). Note the frenzied mob response of the starving people (7:16)' and the recurring reference to 'the gate'.
- The story closes with the fate of the king's most trusted officer ('*on whose hand he leaned*', 7:17). As predicted by 'the man of God' (i.e., Elisha), the officer in question dies a tragic death due to his refusal to believe in the possibility of a miracle to save the city from the siege. The critical interaction between Elisha and the officer precedes the story (7:1-2) and is repeated in its closing verses (7:18-19). The story seems to be underscoring the power of prophecy.

Reflection

Do you believe in miracles? What insights do you glean from this biblical story? How do the various characters 'speak' to you?

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996). Scripture quotations: NRSV.