

# Haftarah

*'Set your face against Pharaoh...'*



Pharaoh, king of Egypt, you  
[are like the] great crocodile,  
crouching in its River branches,  
thinking: *My River is mine, I made  
it for myself...*

I will put hooks through your  
jaws...

I will pull you up out of your River  
branches...

Ezekiel 29:3-4

## Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Ezekiel 28:25-29:21) accompanies the Torah portion *Vaera*: Exodus 6:2—9:35.
- Both readings describe devastating events for Egypt. In the Torah portion it is the infliction of the plagues due to Pharaoh's refusal to liberate the Hebrew slaves. In the Haftarah it is a prediction that, because Egypt has been an unreliable ally to Jerusalem in the face of Babylonian aggression, it too will be conquered.

## Background

- Ezekiel, from a priestly family in the southern kingdom ('Judah'), was a prophet caught up in the Babylonian exile of 587 BCE.
- Although Egypt had promised help to Judah, it was not forthcoming when Judah was attacked by Babylon. Ezekiel was among those who suffered deportation to Babylon.
- This Haftarah is mainly a series of prophecies against Egypt (29:1-16), followed by a prediction of the fate awaiting Egypt (29:17-20). In the opening and closing verses (28:25-26; 29:21) there are two oracles of hope, consoling the people of Jerusalem.

## Ponder

- *'My River is mine, I made it for myself'* (29:3; cf. v.9). The egotistical tone resonates also in the Exodus story of the plagues where Pharaoh's arrogance is confronted by the true God.
- *'Crocodile'* (29:3, Plaut); or *'monster'* (NJPS), *'great dragon'* (29:3, NRSV): a metaphor for Egypt and its king.
- *'I will put hooks through your jaws'* (29:4). An allusion to a mythical battle between God and a (sea)monster which appears in Israelite literature (see Isa. 51:9; Ps. 74:13; Job 26:12).
- *'Forty years'* appears in three successive verses (11,12,13), echoing the Israelites' forty years of wandering. In the bible, the number forty is often symbolic, signifying events taking an irreversible direction.
- *'Never again...'* (29:16). Ezekiel refers to the Israelite alliance with Egypt as a mistake which should not be repeated.
- *'On that day I will make the House of Israel strong'* (29:21). The rabbis ensure that this Haftarah reading ends on a note of hope.

## Reflect

- *Suffering to redemption... despair to hope... humiliation to liberation...* this recurring movement in the Hebrew bible articulates a people's faith in the one, true, living God. Share some thoughts on this, from a biblical, historical or personal perspective.

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

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