

Haftarah

'O Israel, never forget Me'



Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel,
and his Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts:
I am the first and the last,
besides me there is no god.

Isaiah 44:6

Links

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Isaiah 43:21—44:23) accompanies the Torah portion *Vayikra*: Leviticus 1:1—5:26.
- Where Leviticus deals with laws on sacrifice, the words of Isaiah respond to the plight of a people in exile (Babylon). Unable to make sacrifices in the Temple, the prophet urges them to bring to God the offerings of their heart.

Background

Babylon conquered the southern kingdom (Judah), its capital Jerusalem, in 586/7 BCE. Imagine the suffering, even loss of hope, of the Judeans in exile, removed from their homeland, their way of life, their Temple system. Even when political pressures eased, some hesitated to return to their traditions. Isaiah ('Second Isaiah') speaks to this audience with a message of hope of restoration through God's deliverance as well as stern warnings against giving up hope and partaking in the idol worship of the surrounding culture.

Ponder

This Haftarah reading can be digested in four sequential passages:

- **Chastizement for the sins of the past** (43:21-28)
After an opening statement of hope, the prophet turns to the sins of the people. He dares them to refute the charges of infidelity (*'Let us go to trial; set forth your case, so that you may be proved right'* 43:26)
- **Hope in a brighter future** (44:1-5)
The future proclaimed by the God of Jacob promises new life for *the Lord's* people. Note the imagery: lifegiving waters making dry soil fertile to produce plant growth.
- **Denunciation of idol worship** (44:6-20)
'All work to no purpose' (44:9, JPS). The text is mocking, pointing to the futility of idol-making and the powerlessness of the idols.
- **Assurance of God's saving action on behalf of Israel** (44:21-23)
'O Israel, you will not be forgotten...for I have redeemed you' (44:21-22). Israel remains God's chosen one—partner and servant of a merciful God. The Haftarah closes jubilantly: *'Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it; shout, O depths of the earth...For the Lord has redeemed Jacob'* (44:23).

Reflect

Religious renewal, the call to stay focused on one's core human and spiritual values, is the prophetic challenge posed in every age.

- What are the idols that distract us in the 21st century?
- How do you keep hope in 'exile' (however you describe 'exile')?
- What aspect of the prophet's message especially spoke to you?

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

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Text: Teresa Pirola. Illustration: Sarann Ryan. © The Story Source, 2012. *Haftarah* (from the Hebrew root word; 'to conclude') is the name given to the reading which, in accordance with the Jewish lectionary, is read after the Torah portion of the day, at Shabbat and festival services.