

# Haftarah

*'He wrestled with an angel and prevailed'*



How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I let you go, O Israel?  
How can I make you like Admah,  
or treat you like Zeboim?... I will  
not act upon My wrath, I will not  
turn to destroy Ephraim: for I am  
God and no mortal, the Holy One  
in your midst; I will not come with  
anger.

Hosea 11:8-9

## Link

- In the Jewish calendar, this Haftarah reading (Hosea 11:7 - 12:12) accompanies the Torah portion *Vayishlah*: Genesis 32:4 - 36:43.
- *'He wrestled with an angel and prevailed...'* (12:5). In Hosea 12:3-5 the prophet illustrates his message with Torah stories of Jacob. He urges his people to be like the transformed Jacob who is blessed through struggle, perseverance, and is divinely renamed 'Israel'.
- Note how a firm knowledge of the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs greatly enriches our understanding of the rest of Scripture.

## Background

- The Prophet Hosea lived in the 8th century BCE. The Israelites had split into two kingdoms: Israel in the north, Judah in the south. Hosea lived in the Northern Kingdom where he observed that material prosperity was not matched by religious commitment. He warns of dire consequences unless his people turns back to the God of Israel, but he also assures them of God's mercy if they repent. In fact, the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians in the year 721 BCE.
- *Ephraim*: another name for the Northern Kingdom of Israel. *Admah* and *Zeboim*: cities famous for their annihilation. *Gilead*: a land east of the Jordan. *Gilgal*: a town near Jericho.

## Things to ponder

- *'How can I let you go, O Israel? ... all My pity stirs'* (11:8). The Lord's longing for and fidelity to Israel is palpable.
- *'They shall come from Egypt fluttering [NRSV: trembling] like a bird'* (11:11). Note the effect of contrasting images: God as a roaring lion (11:10) and Israelites as homecoming birds.
- *'Sending oil to Egypt'* (12:2; NRSV: 12:1). That is, oil used for oath and treaty rituals. Israel's allegiance to the Lord God is called into question.
- The episode of Jacob's transformation through struggle is central to both Torah portion and Haftarah. How can we use this sacred story to better effect in our lives of faith and prayer? How can we call on this story as part of teaching our children to walk courageously in God's paths?

## Reflection

This Haftarah reading is a call to conversion of heart. Ponder this challenge with the help of this verse from the Talmud: *'What does Rabbi Eliezer mean when he says, "Repent one day before your death?" How can one know when that day comes? Since no person can know this, one must repent every day of one's life.'* [B. Shabbat 153a. See Plaut, 73]

Bibliography: Harper Collins Study Bible: NRSV (NY, 1993); Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996). Scripture quotations: Plaut.