

Haftarat Bo אב

Torah: Exodus 10:1–13:16

Haftarah: Jeremiah 46:13–28

Divine Judgment or Fatherly Correction

General Overview

The theme of this haftarah is very similar to the previous one — God's promised destruction of Egypt. The passage begins with the announcement that the Babylonians will come against Egypt, then, it continues with a description of the destruction that awaited Egypt at the hands of the Babylonians. The conclusion of this haftarah speaks of Israel. Like the Egyptians, Israel also had to fear the Babylonians. However, unlike the Egyptians, the people of Israel, after being disciplined by God, were promised a hopeful and encouraging future.

Connection to the Parasha

Both this and the previous haftarah from Ezekiel speak a great deal about the destruction and humiliation of Egypt by the Babylonians. Both haftarot remind us of the defeat of Egypt by the Lord God of Israel when He finished the plagues and brought Israel out of Egypt. By the time the Israelites had left, Egypt was practically in shambles because of the destruction of the plagues. What is even more important, however, was the humiliated spiritual state in which the plagues left Egypt. Each plague was against one of their important gods. Thus, the Torah portion records Egypt's spiritual defeat and the haftarah records Egypt's military defeat — both at the hand of God.

Exposition

Jeremiah's prophecies are always difficult to outline because of the way that they are written. It would make the most sense to try to travel through this haftarah verse by verse. Nonetheless, we have detected a suitable outline found from its contents.

Remember that the purpose of our outlines is to help the teacher to stay on track while he teaches the passage and to help the student to follow the teacher easier. With that in mind, this outline is offered for our study purposes:

- I. The Fearsome Babylonians
- II. The Fright of Egypt
- III. The Fright of Israel

This excerpt of the Haftarah Bo commentary will focus on the third section, viz., The Fright of Israel.

III. The Fright of Israel

The final major section of this haftarah is a brief passage about Israel. The purpose of the passage seems to be to create a contrast between how God relates to the nations, such as Egypt, as opposed to how He relates to His covenant people, Israel. Let us look at some points of comparison.

A. A Reason for Fear

Both Israel and Egypt had plenty of reason to be afraid at this time in their histories. In both cases, God was sending the full might of the Babylonian war machine to inflict judgment upon them. In both cases,

- their beloved capital cities would be destroyed,
- many people would either be exiled to Babylon or killed in the war,
- and the leaders of the two victim nations would also suffer.

Thus, there is a great deal of similarity between what would happen to Egypt and what would happen to Judah at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Indeed, Israel would have plenty reason to be afraid. But, as we shall see, their fear would not be the same as that of the Egyptians.

B. Return Verses Retribution

Egypt was promised a return from the captivity. So was Israel. But notice the difference between the two kinds of returns. Whereas it is stated to Egypt that they will return and the population will increase (46:26), Israel is told much more.

First, God said to Israel that not only would she come back from exile, but that in the end, her presence back in the Land would be marked by security (46:27).

Second, Egypt is promised no retribution. But it is said of Israel in 46:28 that God will make a full end of all of the nations into which she was scattered. That is just, Divine retribution. Moreover, it is an indication that the presence of God was to be with Israel in a unique way.

C. Divine Judgment or Fatherly Correction

Finally, Israel's punishment is seen as a Divine correction. On the one hand, both Egypt and Israel were said to have been "punished." In Jeremiah 46:25, and 28 respectively, the same Hebrew root is used, *poked*, פָּקַד. This word usually denoted a Divine visitation, sometimes in favour, and sometimes (as in this case) in handing out justice. However, at the end of 46:28, the Lord speaks a word to Israel that He does not say to Egypt. To His chosen one, God said that He will "correct them properly." Here, the key word in Hebrew is from the root *yasar* (יָסַר). This word stresses "chastening" or disciplining."ⁱ

This is one of the major differences between God's justice to those who are not in a covenantal relationship with Him and with those who are. To those who do not know Him, God punishes. But to His own, He disciplines and trains as a father brings up his children. "Exile will discipline a wayward and wanton nation, guiding it back to the spiritual obligations of the covenant."ⁱⁱ As we have indicated elsewhere, the ancient Jewish sages placed these verses at the end of the section they chose to be a haftarah. Their thought was to always end a haftarah on a positive note for Israel. That means that a mere promise to Egypt that she would return and become numerous again was, apparently, not so much of a message of hope to the ancient rabbis.

On the other hand, the sages note that 46:27 began with the words, "fear not." That which was meant to encourage the Israelites in exile was not that Judah

would return, but that the "return" would always be with great blessing. Thus, in contrast with all the foregoing, the Prophet closes with a message of hope and restoration, addressed to the Jewish exiles in Egypt and Chaldea. "Other nations shall be blotted out of existence, not so shall it be with Israel."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ BDB, p. 415.

ⁱⁱ Harrison, op. cit., p. 173.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hertz, op. cit., p. 264.