

Haftarat Ekev עקב

Torah: Deuteronomy 7:12–11:25

Haftarah: Isaiah 49:14–51:3

God's Assurance Through the Redeemer

General Overview

Isaiah's prophecies are often structured as a mixture of rebuke and assurance. Our haftarah this week is one of the assurance passages. It comes in a context of what is often referred to as the "Song of the Servant" — an extended section of Isaiah (chapters 40–53) that develops the themes of the Servant of the Lord, climaxing with chapter 53 and the Servant's atoning sacrifice.

This haftarah also provides some information about the Servant. When it does, it is couched in a context where God is pouring out His words of comfort and assurance to those He had to discipline.

Connection to the Parasha

Parashat Ekev in Deuteronomy is one in which God exhorts Israel to remember to be faithful to His Word so that they may live long in the Land that God would give them. One reason that God exhorted them to do so is that they can be assured that He would never let them down; that He would always be faithful to supply for them.

The basis of that assurance is how He treated them in the wilderness. For although He had to discipline them several times, God was always faithful to them, teaching them, and being with them.

Accordingly, this haftarah also emphasizes that same theme. Although God meted out the discipline when it was necessary, He also took care of His people.

There is another fascinating connection between the Torah portion, this haftarah, and the life of Yeshua. One cannot know exactly when the haftarot were first developed or set in order. There are many debates about that issue. However, if we study the order of the present haftarot and their corresponding Torah portions, we will notice a startling similarity to certain events in the early ministry of Yeshua.

We have already seen that, traditionally, the haftarah of comfort, Isaiah chapter 40, was the first one following Tisha B'Av. Knowing the theme of that day, it is little wonder why a passage of comfort was chosen. There were a few lines from that haftarah which John the Immerser quoted in reference to himself as he was ministering in the wilderness and calling people to repentance. The gospels indicate that Yeshua made His first "official" public appearance at the time when John was preaching repentance.

It so happens that the next episode from Yeshua's life that the gospels record was when Yeshua was sent by the Lord into the Judean wilderness to be tempted

by the Evil One. As He was going through one of the temptations, Yeshua quoted a passage from Deuteronomy chapter 8 to fight off Satan. Deuteronomy chapter 8 just happens to be the next Torah portion in sequence to the haftarah that was quoted by John. In our present haftarah, we find the Servant being tried by God, (See 50:4–11).

We do not know for certain if the same haftarot readings were already instituted in Yeshua's day. But these details would definitely seem to point in that direction. If so, they may have the ability to give us somewhat of a time frame in which to date the events in the early public ministry of Yeshua. The immersion and wilderness wanderings may have taken place sometime in August, culminating in the synagogue of Nazareth where Yeshua read the haftarah from Isaiah chapter 61; this haftarah is traditionally placed on the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah.

Naturally, we cannot be dogmatic on any of this because there are too many unknown factors at this point. But it is an interesting line of thought — and it might be correct!¹

Exposition

This passage is a difficult one to place into an outline. It is especially difficult to properly interpret chapter 50 and place it neatly into the context of the haftarah. However, we think we have been successful in an attempt to do so.

Since the passage centers mostly on the assurance that God gives to His people, we consequently offer the following outline as the framework for his week's study:

- I. God's Assurance Through Remembrance
- II. God's Assurance Through Repopulation
- III. God's Assurance Through Relationship
- IV. God's Assurance Through the Redeemer
- V. God's Assurance Through the Rock

In this excerpt from Haftarat Ekev, we will focus on the section IV, God's Assurance Through the Redeemer.

IV. God's Assurance Through the Redeemer

Yet another way that God gives Israel and Judah His assurance of a continuing relationship is found in 50:4–11. To be succinct, that assurance comes through knowledge of The Servant.

Beginning in 50:4, we find another of Isaiah's frequent and sudden transitions. There appears to be little or no connection between what was previously said in the preceding section to what follows in verses 4–11. However, we need to keep in mind the thrust of the entire context of Isaiah chapters 42–53. For this we would do well to carefully study the comments by Dr. Allen A. MacRae, a former professor of mine years ago. He observes

The construction of this part of Isaiah is somewhat like a symphony. A theme is presented and briefly discussed. Then a second theme is

introduced which, in turn, may lead into a third. Thus certain basic ideas are presented repeated, and stressed not merely to state the ideas they contain, important as that is, but to make a profound effect upon the hearts and minds of people who are already in their imagination suffering the horrors of the Babylonian Exile, which Isaiah had predicted.²

One of these symphonic themes is the theme of the Servant of the Lord. Because there are other themes, all of which are ultimately related,

As we examine succeeding chapters, we shall note many sudden transitions. . . Without recognition of the importance of the symphonic structure, these chapters might seem like a patchwork of colours arranged in helter-skelter fashion. Once the underlying structure is recognized they appear instead as a beautiful tapestry, with sections logically arranged in such a way as to convey great thoughts forcibly and yet tactfully.³

If Dr. MacRae is correct, as we believe he is, then beginning with verse 4 of chapter 50, we read a continuation of Isaiah's symphonic theme of "The Servant of the Lord." The theme picks up seemingly out of nowhere at 50:4, (a sudden transition). Yet, it is intricately tied in with what Isaiah had been saying about comfort and encouragement to the needy of Israel. It is the third extended passage in Isaiah chapters 42–53 to speak of the Servant.

To be sure, given the actual wording of the text, there are many who say that the person speaking, beginning with 50:4, is the prophet Isaiah himself. Yet, as we look closer at the details of this passage, we will note that there are several things said about the speaker that cannot possibly apply to Isaiah. Moreover, the Servant is mentioned by name in verse ten in a way that the speaker wants the people to heed the Servant's voice because of all that was said about the Servant in the previous verses.

In addition, there are some who suggest that the Servant spoken of in Isaiah 50:4–11 is Israel. This view is, perhaps, best expressed by Rabbi Hertz who says,

The "Servant of the Lord" is ideal Israel, the sanctified minority who are willing to suffer and die for their Faith. They are ready to bear an uncharitableness and persecution at the hands of those of their brethren who may be blind and deaf to the signs of the times, and to the fulfilment of God's purposes in regard to Israel and mankind.⁴

On the surface, this explanation of who the Servant is may sound good, but it has some problems. Permit Victor Buksbazen, a Messianic Jewish scholar of a previous generation, to respond to Rabbi Hertz. Buksbazen writes,

However, the servant of all four passages in Isaiah is unique and so exalted that he fits no known formerly human historical personality. Only Jesus of Nazareth comes close to the majestic figure of the suffering servant. In fact, until the appearance of Jesus, ancient Jewish commentators invariably interpreted the servant passages as applying to the Messiah. The interpretation of these passages as applying to Israel collectively came into vogue much later during the Christological controversies between the Church and the Synagogue.⁵

We agree with Mr. Buksbazu. If this passage, therefore, speaks of the Servant/Messiah, then what characteristics of the Messiah are revealed for us?

(1) The first characteristic of the Servant is his ability to speak words perfectly designed to meet people's needs. Thus, it says that the Servant knows "how to sustain the weary one with a word" (50:4).

The text also indicates that the Servant could do this because God Himself instructed Him to do so. We are reminded of passages such as John 7:16, 14:24, and especially 8:28 where Yeshua, the Servant of the Lord, taught His students saying, "I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me."

Isaiah wanted to tell his people that the Servant was one in whom they could place their trust because, being taught by God, he knew how to sustain them in their weariness and discouragement.

(2) Second, the Servant is said to have obeyed God perfectly. Isaiah may have been faithful, but no man has ever perfectly obeyed God. It cannot be said of a mere man that, "I was not disobedient, nor did I turn back" (50:5).

How obedient would the servant be? That question is answered in 50:6–9. Herein, Isaiah describes a little of the suffering that the Servant would be called upon to do in obedience to God. We see that the Servant readily submitted to suffering when He did God's calling.

This description sounds quite similar to some of the suffering that Yeshua experienced in Matthew 26:67. The Servant's trust in the Lord, especially during suffering, is vividly described in 50:8–9 where the Servant expresses the fact that He knows that he will be vindicated.

(3) Isaiah, in 50:10–11 hints at the reason that he brought up the subject of the Servant. Eventually, in chapter 53 we will learn that the Servant is the answer to all of Israel's woes. It is He who will take upon himself all the sins of his people. It is through Him that sin will be forgiven and through union with Him that sinners will experience a dramatic change in their lives, a change to righteousness. Yet, this Servant also had to suffer in order to bring all of that about. Indeed, his suffering was extraordinary. Yet, He was proven faithful and God, in the end, vindicated him.

In the same way, the people of Israel would experience victory and vindication if they would remain faithful as the Servant did. Because the Servant was victorious through suffering, they can do it too — through and in union with the Servant! Thus, Isaiah can say triumphantly, "Who is among you that fears the Lord, that obeys the voice of His servant, that walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely on his God" (50:10).

Isaiah concludes this section in 50:11 where he uses "fire" and "firebrands" as images of the designs directed against the Servant. It is quite possible that the reference to the fire and firebrands is to some form of their idol worship whereby through supernatural power they became immune to injury or pain as they walked through fire. If so, the lesson was that such immunity would not make them

immune to divine retribution.⁶ The plans some would have against the Servant will only backfire upon themselves.

This lesson was designed to encourage God's people to trust in the Servant. He is the source of all of their deliverance. In Him they can trust their lot.

¹ Many of the following ideas were gleaned from conversations with David Rosenberg, Messianic leader of Congregation Shuvah Ysrael on Long Island. These ideas were originally his and we want to give him the credit he deserves for this brilliant connection. Thank you, David.

² Allen A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, 31.

³ Ibid, 33.

⁴ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 796.

⁵ *The Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 2, 390.

⁶ Hertz, op., cit., 797.