

Haftarat Ki Teitzei

Torah: Deuteronomy 21:10–25:19

Haftarah: Isaiah 54:1–10

God's Troubled Women

General Overview

Before we get into our study for this week, we need to take ourselves two weeks back in time, to Part One of this outline. In *Haftarat Re'eh* we mentioned that we were introducing a subject that would require two weeks of commentary to cover, and that Part Two would fall in *Haftarat Ki Teitzei*. Well, we have now arrived to that haftarah.

Here, in this present haftarah, we are again discussing two women — both symbolic of Jerusalem. The first woman is a barren woman, or at least one who was barren. The good news of this haftarah is that she will no longer be barren! God will cause her quiver to be full of offspring. Jerusalem and Israel will spring back to life like as a barren woman who becomes fruitful and bears children.

The second woman is a widowed woman. Like the previous one, her widowhood, a great source of shame for her, will soon end. In fact, her widowhood was only temporary. She was decidedly living apart from her husband all the time and now He draws her back to Himself. In this, there is also great cause for joy.

There is something peculiar about this haftarah that we need to address. One look at the schedule of haftarot will clearly show that Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is almost certainly left out of the scheduled readings on purpose. *Haftarat Shoftim* covered the verses right up to Isaiah 52:12 and now *Haftarat Ki Teitzei* picks up immediately following the whole of Isaiah chapter 53. Why is this so? Why is chapter 53 left out of the haftarah readings?

The answer is rather obvious and sad. Ever since the time when Rashi's viewpoint of Isaiah chapter 53 became the standard Jewish interpretation, sometime in the 11th century, Jewish commentators, for the most part, have regarded Isaiah chapter 53 as referring to Israel, rather than to the Messiah. That is diametrically opposed to the ancient Jewish commentators who almost universally regarded Isaiah 53 as messianic.¹ The reason for such a change seems that it is a response to virulent Christian anti-Semitism and its subsequent persecution of the Jewish people in the name of Yeshua.

In order to avoid any interpretation of the Scripture that even came close to the traditional Christian one, rabbis and Jewish scholars have studiously avoided a messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53, finding in Rashi, an able spokesman for their viewpoint.

It is important to know that the Jewish reaction against the messianic understanding of chapter 53 is, in our opinion, not based on careful biblical exegesis. It is, rather, based on an emotional reaction to centuries of horrid Christian anti-Semitism and its resultant persecution.

Thus, in order to avoid anyone even thinking about the possibility that chapter 53 might refer to the Messiah, the rabbis have decided to leave it out altogether when the final haftarah reading schedule was adopted. However, we have not been able to find documentation for this understanding, although it is a common one.

Several years ago, some messianic believers in Israel posted flyers, written in Hebrew, on the street light poles in Tiberius, Israel that asked the question, “Why is Isaiah 53 not read in the synagogue?” referring to its obvious omission from the schedule of haftarah readings. It is a good question to ask; one that deserves to be answered.

Connection to the Parasha

Parashat Ki Teitzei contains teachings that are designed for people in the Holy Community to show grace and mercy to one another. In the same way, this haftarah, the fifth in the series of the “Haftarahs of Consolation,” depicts God showing grace and mercy to Israel, most pitied of all peoples.

Exposition

This haftarah is actually the foundational material of the two-part section that began in Haftarah Re’eh, two portions ago. However, even though Haftarat Re’eh covered Isaiah 54:11–55:5, its reading came before this haftarah. Thus, we shall entitle this portion, “God’s Troubled Women, Part II,” even though these verses are found prior to those of Part I in the text of Isaiah. In other words, the rabbis went out of sequence according to where things are found in Isaiah’s book!

Were our introductory statements too confusing? We hope not. Perhaps our progression to the outline and the commentary material will help clear things up a bit. Let us, therefore, examine “God’s Troubled Women” by looking at . . .

I. A Barren Woman

II. A Widowed Woman

In this excerpt from Haftarat Ki Teitzei, we will focus on section I, A Barren Woman.

I. A Barren Woman

The mood of Isaiah’s book changes sharply between chapters 53 and 54. Chapter 53 was the climax of the series of “Servant Passages” that constituted the dominant theme of chapters 42–53. The climax described the atoning work of the Messiah/Servant.

Now, in Isaiah chapter 54, the mood is one of great hope and jubilation. This attitude is based on the finished work of the Messiah described in chapter 53. From this point on, Isaiah will present bits and pieces of the results of the work of the Messiah.

The haftarah reading opens with the picture of a woman in 54:1–3. Herein, God’s people are likened to a woman who was once barren but now is told to rejoice because, “the sons of the desolate one [will be] more numerous than the sons of the married woman” (54:1b).

Given all of this information, to whom, then, is Isaiah referring? It is generally agreed that the barren woman and the married woman are not referring to any specific physical woman in history. Isaiah is speaking here in symbolic terms. There are at least three opposing viewpoints to explain the symbolism.

The first suggestion, typified by I. W. Slotki, says that the barren woman represents “depopulated Jerusalem.”

The children of the desolate woman refer to the, exiled Judeans returning to the devastated city of Jerusalem. [And the married woman with lots of children pictures]. . . . the populated cities of the heathens where the husband lives with his wife with lots of children.²

This seems to be the clearest explanation, although, Allen MacRae offers two other suggestions. One, he says is that the woman who has no children is Israel in exile while the married woman is Israel before the exile. The main problem here is that even before the exile, Israel was “married” to the Holy One.

The next suggestion explained by Dr. MacRae is that the barren woman represents the gentile nations while the married woman symbolizes Israel. This viewpoint is the one favoured by MacRae for the following reasons. First, he points out that there was no time in Israel’s history when there were no physical or spiritual children. In every period of Israel’s history there was always a remnant that bore spiritual children — even during the exile. It is true that darkness reigned very long amid the gentiles; there was very little spiritual fruit for many centuries. This changed, however, when the Servant came and accomplished His atonement, as Isaiah 53 describes. After Yeshua returned to His Father, there was a great harvest of fruit from among the gentiles — many spiritual children.³

A. A Work Among the Gentiles?

While Slotki’s suggestion seems quite reasonable, it seems that in the context of this particular haftarah, as well as the next few chapters of Isaiah, God may very well have had the gentiles in mind in this section.

One reason for this statement is that there is no mention of Judah, Israel, or Jerusalem in this haftarah reading. Having said this, however, we must realize that that if God is calling upon the gentiles to rejoice because they will now bear fruit for Him, how much more so would Israel be able to rejoice?

One thing we must not proclaim about this passage, however, is that if the gentiles are the barren women who will now bear fruit, it does not mean that God’s favour has moved away from Israel toward the gentiles alone. God loves both equally and promises to have many spiritual children from both groups.

B. Enlarge Your Tents!

There is a slight change of direction between verses 1 and 2. If we are correct in saying that 54:1 refers to the gentiles, then the instructions to enlarge the tent, beginning in 54:2, might refer to Israel.

Isaiah uses common everyday imagery in verses 2 and 3 to indicate that the once barren woman will become so productive that she will need much more space in which to live. Accordingly, Isaiah tells Israel to “enlarge the place of

your tent.” If we are correct in our understanding (and there is a possibility that we may not be), then a beautiful picture is emerging here, one that is further expanded upon in the Brit Hadasha.

The picture is that Israel is the one who was to expand her tent in order to accommodate the great number of people from among the gentiles.

If this is the correct understanding, then notice that Israel is not to fold up her tent and have it replaced with a new, gentile tent, nor is Israel called to change the nature of her tent. Rather, Israel is merely to expand her present tent and its qualities to include the believers from the gentiles. They are to be welcomed into Israel’s tent.

This, of course, is the clear teaching of Shaul of Tarsus, himself an Israelite, in Ephesians chapters 2 and 3. It would also be included in the grafted-in image of Romans chapter 11. He teaches us that gentile believers are now fellow heirs with Israel and are fellow citizens with Israel — not replacing Israel. They come into Israel’s tent, Israel does not go into their tent.

The last part of 54:3 is also a promise to Israel. Not only will her tent be made bigger (to include the increased population from among the gentiles) but her own descendants will again settle in their own ancient cities. Anyone who visits modern day Israel immediately becomes aware of how literally this verse is being fulfilled.

C. Shouts of Joy!

Before we leave our examination of this woman, it is important to note the emotional reaction that we find in 54:1. Isaiah tells her to “sing.” The Hebrew root word translated “sing” is *ranan* (רָנַן). This particular word stresses a “ringing cry” or “crying out with joy.”⁴ It is a very happy and jubilant word.

When Isaiah tells her to sing for joy, it is reminiscent of a famous passage in Jeremiah. Although Isaiah predicted the troubles and deliverance of this “woman,” Jeremiah was a witness to those troubles. Yet, despite what he saw and experienced, Jeremiah writes,

Yet again there shall be heard in this place. . . in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. . . the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who say, “Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good, for His loving kindness is everlasting [and of those] who bring a thank offering into the house of the Lord; for I will restore the fortunes of the land as they were at first,” says the Lord (Jeremiah 33:10–12).

¹ See Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Eerdmans' 1990 reprint edition), Appendix IX, pp. 710–737, “A List of Old Testament Passages Messianically Applied in Ancient Rabbinic Writings,” for an example of how some ancient rabbis regarded Isaiah chapter 53.

² All of these quotes are from I. W. Slotki, *Isaiah* (Soncino), 265.

³ Allen A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah*, 152–153.

⁴ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (“BDB”), 943.