

# Haftarat Korach קרח

**Torah: Numbers 16:1–18:32**

**Haftarah: 1 Samuel 11:14–12:22**

## The Turning From Our True King

### General Overview

This haftarah is a record of a covenant renewal ceremony that took place at Gilgal. Under the leadership of the last Judge, Samuel, Israel was led into a new leadership status — they went from being a theocracy to becoming a kingdom like the other nations that surrounded them. This haftarah, therefore, is the story of what happened at that covenant renewal ceremony and the dynamics of their desire for a king.

### Connection to the Parasha

Both our haftarah and its corresponding Torah portion, *Parashat Korach*, are stories about leadership. In the Torah portion, Korach leads a rebellion against God's chosen leaders Moshe and Aaron. He challenges, in essence, God's decision to appoint Moshe and Aaron as the leaders in Israel. In the end, the Holy One Himself crushed the rebellion, leaving Moshe and Aaron, firmly entrenched as the Divinely appointed leaders of His people.

We will find this same type of situation in the haftarah, Korach. In the Haftarah, the people displayed ingratitude towards their devoted leader, Samuel. They clamoured for a king to take his place.

In the end, the people's rejection of both Samuel — and ultimately the Lord — as their God-appointed leaders, proved disastrous. Shaul ended up walking away from the Lord and, therefore, created great problems for the people of Israel. The sovereignty of God wins out, however, in that Shaul's demise permitted the rise of David and his godly reign.

### Exposition

The contents of this haftarah are quite serious. They present to us a people of Israel who, in a very real way, rebelled against the rule of God over their lives and over their nation. Moreover, it is a transitional passage. The Exodus and the conquest were past history by now. It was time to renew the covenant with God. But the renewing of the covenant brought with it some covenantal changes, such as a change in the leadership structure of Israel. Whereas God was their king in the past, now the people wanted a human king. This passage records this momentous event. Hence, our study outline will reflect the various elements of that thrust. Thus, we will see:

- I. The Desire for a King
- II. The Warning of a King
- III. The Choice of a King
- IV. The Real King

In this excerpt from Haftarat Korach, we will focus on the first section, The Desire for a King.

## **I. The Desire for a King**

### **A. A Covenant Renewal**

The haftarah opens with a covenant renewal ceremony, taking place at Gilgal. Gilgal, very close to Jericho, was the first place the Israelites set foot in the Promised Land after crossing the Jordan River. That, plus its proximity to the tribes that settled east of the Jordan, made Gilgal a most appropriate place for the nation to conduct business.

According to the text, the business at hand was to “renew the kingdom there.” Shaul was already chosen to be their king. But at Gilgal they decided to hold a more formal recognition of that choice. The Hebrew word translated “renew” is from the root חדש. This root can mean “new” or, in this and other cases, it can also mean to “renew.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, they were merely renewing their commitment to have Shaul as their king.

By the way, from the use of this root, in this passage and in other similar contexts, we also therefore, have good warrant to translate the word Brit Chadasha, ברית חדשה as “Renewed Covenant” instead of “New Covenant.”

Although we are told that their stated purpose was to affirm Shaul as king, it is quite possible that they were also renewing their commitment to the covenant of Sinai. There are at least two reasons to suggest this.

First, the covenant of Sinai clearly implied that God was to be Israel’s king, although it made provision for a human king, as well. Desiring a human king, rather than God Himself may have been construed by Israel’s surrounding nations as a desire to forsake the covenant. Therefore, it would not have been wise for the Israelites to do anything that might be interpreted as rejecting their other covenant partner. Hence, a covenant renewal would have been in order whereby they would have publicly reaffirmed their allegiance to God and to the covenant.

Second, with the installation of a human king, certain changes in the structure and functioning of the covenant community would have necessitated amending the covenant to make provision for the king. Since, the covenant already made provision for a king to rule, these changes would not have meant further revelation (at least at this time), but they would have necessitated a renewal of the verbal commitment on the part of Israel to continue with the covenant.

### **B. Just Like the Canaanites**

The discussion above concerning the covenant renewal sounds reasonable. However, we need to back up a bit and ask a very important question: Why would Israel even desire a human king instead of God and the leaders He had chosen? That is a difficult question to answer.

The clearest answer to that question is found in 1 Samuel 8:19–20. Here the people requested a king specifically, “that they also may be like all the nations.” In this light, it is no wonder that they felt a need for a covenant renewal! The Holy One warned them many times in the Torah that they should not be like the Canaanites or any of the nations that surrounded them. In fact, many of the specific teachings of the Torah are designed to help the Israelites to avoid being like those Godless nations.

But now, the Israelites stated a desire to have a king, just like the other nations. Instead of a desire to be different from those pagan nations, they were beginning to become like them. It would have been better if they had said something like, “We want a king who will help to show us what it is like to follow God,” or “We need a king to take care of the abundance of administrative details involved with living in a holy community.” But they did not say those things. Instead, they simply wanted a king in order to do that which the Lord their God had instructed them to avoid — living like the nations around them.

This kind of thinking was not what the Holy One instructed them to think like. Therefore, they needed a spiritual revival. This would have been reflected in a covenant renewal.

### **C. The Storm**

Samuel the prophet, being a man of God, would not let the matter drop. He saw their request for a king to be a sinful request. Accordingly, beginning in 1 Samuel 12:17, he asks the Holy One for a sign demonstrating to the people that their request for a king was a sin.

The time of the year was late May or the early part of the summer. We know this because 12:17 says it was the time for the wheat harvest. It is very unusual for it to rain in Israel during that time of the year. Yet, Samuel asked the Lord to send both thunder and rain. To do so would have endangered their wheat crop. By calling for such a storm, therefore, Samuel was asking for a “sign,” a demonstration of the Lord’s support for him, God’s servant, whom the people would ignore at their great peril.

The sign would have communicated to the people that if they followed what Samuel was about to say, there would be great blessing in the Land. But, if not, then just as the rains would harm their wheat harvest, so would their disobedience hinder their chances for blessing. Sure enough, God sent the storm.

The display of divine power in the rainstorm would force the people to “realize” how evil their motives had been when they had “asked” for a king.<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew in this passage is quite picturesque. For example, the word translated “thunder” (קול) is really the word that could mean “sound,” but also “voice.” Perhaps the text was hinting that the thunder was God speaking! In addition, the rain spoken of is not just a normal shower. It is the word usually denoting the late spring rains, *matar* – מטר. If they come in season, such rains are beneficial. But if they come out of season (as in our passage) they can be very destructive, prohibiting pollination, among other things.<sup>3</sup> Last, in 12:17 Samuel tells the people that this storm was to come because they “asked” for a king. The word translated “asked” is from the root, *sha'al* – שאל. It was intended to be a pun of the word for Shaul, both of which are closely related to each other, both being derived from the same roots.

To close this commentary, we would like to point out two important things that Samuel did in this episode that stand out to demonstrate his wisdom and integrity as a man of God.

First, he takes special care to remind Israel of their history. This is the thrust of 12:6–12. This brief history lesson served to point out to Israel that God never left them defenceless and without the best leadership. Their request for a king to fulfil any leadership lack was totally unfounded.

History tells the story. If they would remember what God did for them in the past, they would head for the future with renewed confidence in His ability to lead.

Second, when he saw that there was no going back. Samuel said.

Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; but I will instruct you in the good and right way (12:23).

Samuel was a good and faithful man of God, fulfilling his office of judge and prophet steadfastly to the very end of his days. He said that since he could not convince them to abandon their request for a king, he considered it to be his duty to pray for them and to teach them God's ways, ways of the Torah. In this he provides for us a great example of a faithful man of God — one who is always willing to pray for people and to be ever ready and willing to teach them the Word of God.

This also teaches us something about God. As always, there were many things going on at the same time. There was Israel's request for a king. There was God's testing their covenant faithfulness. There was Samuel's struggle to minister to such an ambivalent nation — and more. All the time, God, once again, demonstrated His impeccable wisdom to handle such human affairs with grace and knowledge.

Even in this the Holy One showed to His people, that no matter what King they would have ruling over them, in the end, no one could truly replace Him as their all-wise, persistent sovereign.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, "1, 2 Samuel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* ("EBC"), vol. 3, 642.

<sup>2</sup> EBC, op. cit., 649.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* ("BDB"), 564. This information was also gleaned from class notes taken by Vered Hillel, instructor at Israel College of Bible, from a class in Israel on the *Land, Nature and Society of the Bible*.