

Haftarat Pinchas פִּינְחָס

Torah: Numbers 25:10–30:1

Haftarah: 1 Kings 18:46–19:21

A Brief Look at the Life of a Prophet of God

General Overview

This is another haftarah taken from the life and ministry of Elijah the prophet. It consists of a lively series of episodes about the famous prophet.

Geographically, the story begins in the Galilee with Elijah fleeing for his life from Jezebel. Then, the bulk of the haftarah takes place in the Negev around Beersheba and even as far south as Mount Horeb, in the Sinai. Here Elijah more or less bemoans his life situation, thinking he is the only one left who is faithful to the Lord. In this state, an angel who virtually ignores his emotional state and prepares him for the next assignment from the Holy One ministers to him. Finally, the haftarah concludes with Elijah returning to the Galilee after taking a short jaunt to anoint a king in Damascus. Upon his return to the Galilee, God instructed him to choose his successor, Elisha.

Connection to the Parasha

Parashat Pinchas, found in Numbers 25:10–30:1, begins with the story of how God commended Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron, for slaying an Israelite man for having sexual relations with a Moabite woman. Pinchas was exonerated for this killing because, in reality, he was safeguarding the holiness of God and the holiness of God's people.

In like manner, Elijah the prophet courageously slew the Israelite prophets of Baal. The Haftarah recounts how he had to flee from the wrath of Jezebel who wanted to kill him for his zealous act. Thus, “the zeal of Pinchas and the zeal of Elijah form the connecting link between the Sidrah and the Haftarah.”¹

Exposition

One of the things that is striking about this haftarah is how busy and varied the life of a prophet was. Sometimes one gets the impression that a prophet just sat around looking wise and having people come to him in order to receive direction and encouragement from the Lord. Not so! We can see from this passage that to be a prophet one had to be energetic and flexible, as well as being able to hear from God and trust Him.

In light of the contents of this haftarah, therefore, we have decided to deviate a bit from our normal practice of offering an expositional outline derived from the passage. Instead, we have decided to be a little creative and will examine this haftarah as if we were reading Elijah's personal daily journal (not that he kept one, mind you!).

The student will note that we have divided our passage into dates, as if we were reading his diary. Please keep in mind that these dates are entirely fictitious! They are purely an invention of this commentator devised for the sake of interest, continuity, and to help to facilitate the commentary writing. Although they are fictitious, we have, however, attempted to make the dates and time periods as historically realistic as we can. Let us now embark on our examination of the first few dates of Elijah's "journal."

Two Months in the Life of A Prophet

Where do we begin? Let us make an educated guess about the approximate time span of this part of Elijah's life. We know from other historical records that the year is sometime in the mid 800's BCE, perhaps near the end of Elijah's ministry, around the year 853 BCE.²

We also know from 1 Kings 18 that God sent a great rain and thunderstorm that ended the three-year drought Elijah had predicted. Let us assume that this storm came in the normal time of the year for such storms to occur in the Land of Israel, that is, perhaps anywhere between January to early March.

This storm came as a result of Elijah's battle with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. After that confrontation, Elijah ordered those prophets of Baal to be slain. It is this event that caused the anger of Ahab's wicked wife Jezebel to seek Elijah's life — the event that opens our haftarah.

There is one more possible educated guess we can make concerning the time frame in which this story takes place. When Elijah fled from Jezebel, he went south to the Negev. While he was there the angel of the Lord appeared to him and instructed him to make a journey to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God — the same place that Israel received the Torah through Moshe. Let us assume that God purposely timed the prophet's visit there to coincide with Shavuot, the time that it is assumed the Torah was given. This places him at Horeb around late May or very early June. We have some good reasons for this assumption as will be explained later.

Thus, taking into consideration all of the foregoing assumptions, it might be safe to begin our trek through Elijah's diary sometime before Pesach the year 853 BCE. We recognize, however, that not everyone would agree with our timing. Perhaps it is best if we heed to the comments of such eminent scholars as D. J. Wiseman who suggests that "this account may cover a long period in which reversal after the Carmel victory took place."³ It is with great fear and trepidation, therefore, that we suggest a different viewpoint and put forth a date somewhere around 15 March 853 BCE on which to begin our commentary.

15 March 853 BCE: The Running Prophet

We do not know how old Elijah was at this time of his life. If Wiseman's chart is correct and our chronological assumptions are anywhere near correct, he is approximately 30–33 years old.⁴ We need to consider this when we realize that

twice at the beginning of the haftarah we are told that Elijah ran, apparently great distances.

The first long-distance run was just a warm-up for the second marathon. In 18:46, the text says that just as the rain was approaching Mount Carmel, the scene of the famous confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, King Ahab got in his chariot and sped to Jezreel to meet with his wife Jezebel. Jezreel was where Ahab's summer palace was located. That detail does not necessarily mean that it was summertime. Remember that there had been three years of severe drought. When it does not rain in Israel, the weather is usually warm, sometimes even hot. Ahab had 27 kilometres to go in his chariot since Jezreel was located at the foot of Mount Gilboa, midway between Megiddo and Beth Shean.⁵ However, Elijah was running instead of riding, yet, by the power of God, he beat Ahab home.

Although Elijah was empowered by God, such a run was not unreasonable, some runners could easily cover 100 miles in two days.⁶ Perhaps Elijah went ahead of Ahab out of concern for his spiritual welfare when he would have to face his wicked wife Jezebel and tell her all of the momentous events of the day. Indeed,

What a momentous day it had been for the king! How his head must have reeled with the thoughts of the contest: the pitiful screams of Baal's helpless priests, the calm yet awe-inspiring petition of Elijah, the terrifying and spectacular holocaust that followed, the repentance of the people, and the execution of the pagan prophet! As Ahab rode along through the gathering downpour, the spirit-empowered prophet through whom God had effected his great triumph ran ahead of the royal chariot like a specter.⁷

17 March: The Fleeing Prophet

Ahab arrived home and told his wife all that had happened. She, of course, blew up! Since she was a Canaanite, and not an Israelite, she was also a fervent Baal worshipper. To find out that not only had Elijah humiliated her prophets, but that they were also slain, according to his direction, would have sent her into an outrage.

Hence, when we read in 19:2 that she promised to kill Elijah for what he had done, it is perfectly in her character. After all,

the name of Jezebel usually evokes for us the image of a painted woman who is sexually alluring ... a manipulator of men, a political meddler, and idolatress. [In addition], the Bible's condemnations of her, however, concern her role in public religious and political affairs, not her private immorality.⁸

This threat sent Elijah back on the road, like a roadrunner. This time, however, he was not running in order to possibly minister to someone. Rather, he was running for his life. Moreover, unlike that relatively short jog between Mount Carmel and Jezreel (27 kilometres, about 17 miles), Elijah now set off toward the south, to Beersheba.

Presumably he chose that city because it was the most southerly city in Judah, the rival kingdom of Israel and a place in which Jezebel would not have been able to harm Elijah. After he arrived in Beersheba, the text informs us that Elijah left his servants there and proceeded to go into the wilderness.

At this point in the story, we agree with Wiseman when he observes, “The historian deliberately selects events which parallel Moses who also left his servants (Ex. 24:2ff; 33:11)...so that he could face God alone.”⁹

Thus, in a relatively short time, we are able to catch a glimpse of the normal life of God’s prophets. The Haftarah begins in the context of the man of God performing God’s work by speaking forth His Word followed by his desire to minister to his king, even though his king was no man of God himself! Then, after having time to wash his clothes and rest his running feet, we see Elijah packing his bags again, this time fleeing persecution — a common plight for God’s prophets.

Let us now return to his journal to see what else he was going through.

29 March: The Distraught Prophet

It is about a 90-mile journey from the Galilee to the Negev. Given the fact that Elijah may have been running for a good portion of the time and eating very little, it could have taken him about 3-5 days to reach his destination in the wilderness.

After he reached his desired destination in the wilderness he sat under a juniper tree and asked the Lord to take his life from him. Literally it reads that he asked the Lord to take his “soul” from him. This “juniper tree” (*rotem* (רותם)) is really “a kind of broom-shrub,”¹⁰ common in the wilderness. It grows to a height of about 3 meters (about 9-10 feet).¹¹

It seems that Elijah had enough of being persecuted.

He, the mighty prophet, had stood for God as boldly as any of those who had gone before him. Yet here he was, alone and seemingly deserted in this desert wasteland, the very symbol of a wasted life.¹²

The very fact that he requested God to take his life did not mean that it was God’s will to do so. This was one prayer of a righteous man that would not get answered! It is up to God and God alone to determine when to take or give a life. Nothing can change His predetermined plan for mankind, not even the desperate request of such a man of God as Elijah.

Elijah’s request to die is based on his complaint to the Lord in 19:4 where he says, “It is enough; now, Oh Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.” There are two parts to his request. The first is when he says, “now is enough.” It is difficult to determine precisely what Elijah meant by those words. It is reasonable to suggest something like what Rabbis Hochberg and Rosenberg suggest when they say he meant, “How long will my life be in danger? I would rather die than continue living like this.”¹³

The second reason he thought it was time to go is that he said, “For I am not better than my fathers.” Here he probably meant, “Just like his fathers before him, his life, too, would eventually come to a natural end. It may as well be now.”¹⁴

In addition to the prophet performing mighty acts for God, here we catch a glimpse of some of the emotional backlash he suffered. He was tired of it all and wanted nothing more than to quietly go home in order to be with his God.

It is safe to assume that his experience was no different than most of the other prophets of God. There are days when there is so much good to do for the Lord and when there is so much courage to demonstrate in the face of persecutors. Yet, there are moments like what Elijah experienced when emotionally the prophet just feels like giving up.

13 April: The Nourished Prophet

It is important to notice that the Holy One did not rebuke Elijah for his feelings. These feelings are a natural part of being human.

However, the Lord did not let His servant remain in that state very long. It is difficult to determine how much time elapsed between the times he arrived in the wilderness and when the angel came to minister to him. The text gives us the impression that it all happened the same day. But that may not necessarily be the case. At some point, however, God sent an angel to help to revive Elijah by making him eat and drink. It was not an easy task, for the angel had to do it twice. Apparently Elijah was determined that this would be his end!

The Holy One was wise enough to tell Elijah, through the angel, that the nourishment was for a journey. The Lord did not tell Elijah that the food was to prepare him to minister again, perhaps that would have been too much for Elijah in his weakened state. He needed time to heal.

Thus, the angel informed Elijah that he must take the food and drink because he had to go on a journey. As it turned out, the trip was to be for 40 days and the destination — Mount Horeb, the mountain of God.

¹ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 699.

² Based on the chronological chart offered by D. J. Wiseman in *1 & 2 Kings* (TOTC), 28.

³ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵ Frank E. Gaebelien, gen ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* ("EBC"), vol. 4, 147.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁸ "Jezebel," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, vol. 2, 1057.

⁹ Wiseman, *op. cit.*, 172.

¹⁰ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* ("BDB"), 958.

¹¹ Wiseman, *op. cit.*, 172.

¹² EBC, *op. cit.*, 149.

¹³ Reuven Hochberg and A. J. Rosenberg, *The Book of Kings 1*, 198.

¹⁴ I. W. Slotki, *Kings* (Soncino), 137.