

Haftarat Vayikra ויקרא

Torah: Leviticus 1:1–5:26

Haftarah: Isaiah 43:21–44:23

God's Continued Calling to Israel to Return to Him

General Overview

Haftarat Vayikra is found in the section of Isaiah that has been alluded to as “The Song of the Servant.” These are a series of messages recorded from Isaiah chapters 40 to 53 that Isaiah spoke to the people of Judah. Within this section, the prophet delivers mixed messages of rebuke and encouragement designed to accomplish one purpose — to focus the people’s attention on the person and work of the Servant, the Messiah. All of these messages build up to and culminate in chapter 53, perhaps the clearest expression and prediction of the atoning sacrifice of Messiah in the entire Tanakh.

Isaiah chapters 43–44, our haftarah for this week, deals with Israel’s fall into idolatry and the subsequent abuse of the sacrificial system. This passage is also intermingled with stern rebukes for this idolatry and finishes with comforting assurances of Divine forgiveness.

Connection to the Parasha

The corresponding parasha comes from the first five chapters of Leviticus, wherein Moshe taught the children of Israel about the nature and function of the sacrificial system. The sacrifices were intended to bring a sinner close to God. In Isaiah chapters 43–44, the prophet denounces the people for, in so many words, pushing God away. Moreover, the blood of a sacrifice was the basis for atonement. The haftarah tells us that it was not the bloody sacrifice that enables God to forgive; rather, it comes solely from the Holy One’s grace and mercy.

Exposition

This passage, like so many others from the prophets is rather difficult to outline. However, we remain undaunted in a continued effort to provide such outlines! Hence, following is the breakdown of the passage in hope that it will aid you, the student, in either studying or teaching on Isaiah chapters 43–44:

- I. Ingratitude (43:21–28)
- II. Blessing (44:1–8)
- III. Idolatry (44:9–20)
- IV. Return (44:21–23)

In this excerpt from the Haftarat Vayikra, we will look at section IV.

IV. Return (44:21–23)

Almost anybody can make an idol. True, it takes a special talent to carve and shape the figure. But, those skills can be learned. However, who can craft the Craftsman? In 44:21 Isaiah reminds the people of Israel, those who were falling prey to idolatry, that God is the one that formed them. Because of that, the Holy One tells them that they are His servants and not the servants of the useless idols. Thus, God bids them, “Return to Me” (44:22). In fact there are four important truths about God’s relationship to Israel mentioned in this last section of the haftarah, verses 21–23.

A. Their Calling and Identity

The first truth mentioned here is the call and identity of Israel. This is not a new topic for this passage. Back in 43:21, Isaiah told Israel that they were people chosen by God to declare Him throughout His creation. What is different in 44:21 is that God affirms His calling upon Israel despite their present wayward spiritual condition. It is, in a sense, a prophecy of what He will do for the nation in the future. Because God called them to be His servants, He continues to fulfil that calling in them. God’s calling is fixed. No matter how people are unfaithful in the process — God continues to be faithful to His promises.

B. Forgiveness

The second truth that is revealed in this passage is the assurance of God’s forgiveness. Isaiah uses very picturesque language to speak of God’s forgiveness in 44:22. He says, “I will blot out your transgressions . . . like a cloud.” The word “blot out” is from the root, *makhah*, מַחַח, and is used in the Tanakh to speak of wiping away one’s tears, or erasing writing with water. Just as a cloud, being water vapour, vanishes into the air, so will God do so to Israel’s sins.

Isaiah does not yet say how God will do this; he is building to that. Passage after passage, Isaiah builds a case against Israel and Judah concerning their sins. Verse after verse, Isaiah reminds Israel that she cannot fulfil God’s calling upon her for she is sinful. Yet, section after section, Isaiah also tells them that God will remove their sins from them. But how will God do it? That question will be answered in the climax of this part of Isaiah, chapter 53. He will do it in the Messiah who will take upon Himself their sins and make them into a new people. This will be for all who will trust in Him. Moreover, eventually, God will turn the nation around and they will return to Him as a people.

C. Redemption

The third truth about Israel mentioned in these verses is that God says that they have been redeemed. The Hebrew uses the word redeemed (*ga'al*, גָּאֵל) in what is known as the perfect tense. In Modern Hebrew, this is normally the past tense. But Biblical Hebrew is different. The verb tense does not emphasize *time*, but rather a *kind* of action. In this case, the perfect tense is a tense of completed action.

Thus, when God tells Israel in this verse that He redeemed Israel, He is emphasizing the fact that it is already accomplished. This, of course, may refer to the historical act of redemption when the Holy One brought the nation out of slavery in Egypt. But it may also speak of a future redemption as if it has already occurred. Scholars sometimes call this futuristic use of the perfect tense, the “prophetic perfect,” meaning that God often describes future events by using a perfect tense verb — as if they have already happened.

If only the Exodus from Egypt is on the writer’s mind in 44:22, then what the Lord is saying is that He commands Israel to return to Him and serve Him and not their fabricated idols. The reason that He can make such a demand is that, in reality, He owns them because He purchased them when He redeemed them from Egypt. He is simply demanding of them what is rightfully His.

On the other hand, if a future redemption is in view, then this passage points to that day of salvation, which has been hinted at all through this commentary. This will be a day described by the prophet Zechariah. He sees a time when Israel’s enemies will be bent on her destruction. Israel will be helpless. At that moment, Zechariah says they will call upon the Messiah for forgiveness and for salvation (chapters 12–14). He will cleanse their hearts and deliver them from annihilation. This will be the ultimate redemption — a releasing of Israel from her bondage of sin forever and as a result, releasing her from the bondage to oppressors.

D. Glorification

The last truth about Israel that this passage discusses is the fact that God will glorify Himself in their midst (verse 23). Unlike the verb “redeem,” the verb “glorify” is in the imperfect tense. This means that the action is indefinite. In other words, by expressing himself in this way, Isaiah was saying that God continually glorifies Himself in the midst of Israel. He did so many times over in their past by working marvellous deliverances for them. He will do so in the future by performing many more mighty works among these people. It seems that even in the midst of Israel’s unfaithfulness, God still brings the most glory to Himself.

Isaiah has demonstrated that his people were deeply involved in idol worship and all of the sin that went along with it. It would have been enough for us to know that they would be forgiven and redeemed. But the best is yet ahead! Isaiah still had not revealed the marvellous truths of the Messiah’s atoning death and resurrection found in chapter 53.

E. Let Us Sing!

Once everyone understands that those truths are the climax of Isaiah’s message of salvation, forgiveness, and redemption, then everyone will be able to do just as Isaiah bids us to do in the beginning of 44:23 — sing and exalt in our Redeemer. Indeed, Isaiah himself seems to break forth into joyous song just thinking about all of those truths about which he had been speaking.

Notice that Isaiah indicates that all of creation will take part in this joyous celebration of God. In fact, it is no accident that of all of the different elements of creation that could have been mentioned, Isaiah specifically says that “the forest

and all its trees” will rejoice. Earlier in this passage, Isaiah described how sinful man had used the trees to make his idols. In doing so, man caused an innocent part of God’s creation to be used for ungodly purposes. In the future, when God accomplishes His ultimate redemption, He will even redeem His creation — the trees, the very ones who were forced to be idols. This, indeed, will be a cause for great rejoicing.