

Haftarat Chayei Sarah חיי שרה

Torah: Genesis 23:1–25:18

Haftarah: 1 Kings 1:1–31

Looking Down the Road of Life

General Overview

The opening scene of this haftarah pictures King David lying covered with bedclothes, in his old age and close to death. As his attendants attempt to keep him warm and cared for, one of his sons, Adonijah, collects important people around him in his effort to proclaim himself the new king upon his father's death.

Bathsheba, the mother of the true heir, Solomon, and David's faithful prophet, Nathan, both attempt to warn David, who up to this time was not aware of this effort by Adonijah. They both remind David that he had previously made promises to Solomon that he would sit on David's throne when the time came. Accordingly, David renews his promise.

Subsequently, a royal anointing ceremony was organized and carried out. When Adonijah heard the people cheering, he became afraid. Hence, he called off his attempt to be the king and submitted to David's choice. The conclusion to the story is not part of the haftarah.

Connection to the Parasha

The Torah portion that corresponds to this haftarah is Parashat Chayei Sarah. It discusses the deaths of Sarah and Abraham. It is also where we learn about the marriage of Isaac. One would think that Abraham would be able to go to his deathbed in peace and solitude. For the most part, he did. However, with the marriage of Isaac comes the birth of the twins, Jacob and Esau, and the beginning of the story of sibling rivalry, especially in regard to the family inheritance.

We find a similar story in our haftarah. David was also on his deathbed. Two of his sons were vying for the right of the inheritance, the throne of Israel. The older one, like Esau, had the natural right and made efforts to claim it. However, it was already previously designated to the favoured, though younger son, Solomon.

Like Isaac, David was the one who ultimately made the final decision. God sovereignly caused David to keep his promise to Solomon, who was subsequently anointed as the rightful heir to David's throne.

Much of that, however, would become the theme for the next haftarah and parasha. As far as this week's haftarah is concerned, however, perhaps J. H. Hertz best expresses its connection to the Torah portion when he comments:

The connection between sidra and haftarah is readily seen. The one portrays Abraham's old age, and the other David's; the one depicts Abraham's solicitude for the piety of his house, and the other, David's for the right succession in his....In violent contrast to the simple life in

Abraham's text, we have, in David's palace, conspiracy and the intrigues of an Oriental Court....¹

Epilogue: King David

The opening chapters of 1 Kings recount the final days of King David, the greatest king Israel ever had. If the only information of King David that we had was found in chapter one, we would not get a very favourable picture of this great monarch of Israel.

The chapter opens with a scene into David's bedroom. He was old. We are told that he was seventy years old when he died.² He is close to his death here. His attendants had a difficult time keeping him warm. Their solution was to find a beautiful young woman to help keep him warm. They found a girl named Abishag, who happens to be from the same town as the woman in the previous haftarah, Shunam. Though she was extremely beautiful, and served David faithfully, “. . . the king was not intimate with her” (1 Kings 1:4).

Why was such a story included into the Biblical text? One reason might be that we are afforded a glimpse into David's growth. All of his life he was surrounded by beautiful women. In a sense, perhaps his desire for women was one of his main downfalls. Now, here in his old age, he has yet another beautiful woman at his side. However, this time, the old king refuses to consort with her. Wise move David!

In addition to a story that reminds us of David's desire for women, this haftarah also pictures David as someone who does not appear to be in charge. One of his sons is about to make himself king and he is not even aware it is happening! This is not the sign of a competent king. Once more, we are not given a favourable picture of David.

Furthermore, we are also afforded a little glimpse into David's family life. We are told that he hardly ever corrected Adonijah, for example. Once more, we are not given too much of a favourable picture of David.

This unfavourable depiction of David's life, however, must be balanced with what we know of the rest of King David's life. When we look at the more complete account of David we see a much different picture; we learn, indeed, that the greatest men of God not only have flesh, but they also walk with God! For certain, David was a very real human being who trusted in God.

We see, for example, a highly successful military man. His successes were a tribute to his personal courage. His tact

is evidenced by the devotion he inspired in Jonathan...Revenge was foreign to his nature... When we remember also his contribution to the temple, the cults, and the Psalter, it is no wonder that his reign was regarded as a golden age and that the Scripture consistently viewed him as the prototype of the Messiah, who was to be great “David's greater Son.”³

¹ J. H. Hertz, Pentateuch and Haftarahs, p. 90.

² ISBE, op. cit., p. 876.

³ Ibid, p. 876.