

Haftarat Shoftim שפטים

Torah: Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9

Haftarah: Isaiah 51:12–52:12

Fear God Instead of Man

General Overview

We have come to the last of the *haftarah* from the section of Isaiah known by some as “The Song of the Servant.” Although the word “servant” does not appear in the passage itself, the material continues to be in context with what has been said thus far since Isaiah chapter 42. Until now, the author has been building up to the climax of the Song of the Servant found in the very next passage, 52:13–53:12.

This haftarah opens with a rebuke to the children of Israel for forsaking the Lord. It is followed by a crescendo of comfort and encouragement culminating at the end of the portion in 52:12 wherein the Holy One speaks about His continued presence in Jerusalem as her defender and protector. In the process, Israel is redeemed from exile and begins to serve as the means of declaring God’s salvation to the nations.

Connection to the Parasha

It is somewhat difficult to see the connection between this haftarah and the Torah portion. However, we agree with Rabbi Hertz that,

the haftarah sets out a program of religion — to plant heaven and establish the earth for the children of men. The Sidrah, in one of its luminous commands — “justice, justice, shalt thou follow” — gives the fundamental prerequisite for all human living on earth.¹

Exposition

Although we are providing a teaching outline for this haftarah, our commentary format will be slightly different. Instead of utilizing the outline as the basis for the presentation, we have decided to journey through this haftarah more or less verse by verse. For those who like teaching outlines, here is a suggested one, from a difficult passage to outline:

- I. Fear God Instead of Man
- II. Finish the Cup of Reeling
- III. Feet That Are Lovely
- IV. Flee Not as Fugitives

In this excerpt from Haftarat Shoftim, we will focus on section I, Fear God Instead of Man.

I. Fear God Instead of Man

In this first section, the Holy One makes a contrast between the powerlessness and mortality of man with His majesty as the Creator. While making that analogy, He challenges Israel to trust Him instead of relying on man.

A. The Fury of the Oppressor

In 51:12, Isaiah begins to answer the questions that the people were expressing through the prophet to the Lord in the previous verses. The nature of those questions boils down to whether or not they could truly trust Him. Was He really their Omnipotent God or not!

God's answer takes us back to Isaiah 40:1, which acted as the opening to this series of messages. There, God gave ample proof that He, indeed, was a universe above the man-made idols that the people had grown accustomed to worshipping. As such, He and He alone could truly deliver the comfort and encouragement they so desperately needed. However, Israel was more afraid of man than God, even though man, like the grass, dies away; but God, being the creator, endures forever.

When the text uses the word "man" in 51:12, it uses the word *anosh* (אנוש) instead of the more common *ish* (איש). *Anosh* stresses the humanity and commonness or baseness of man.² This fits the context where man is depicted as one whose existence is compared to the grass of the rainless Israeli summer that dies up and fades away.

God speaks to Israel's fear with a simple rhetorical question: But where is the fury of the oppressor? Israel was afraid of man because of the fury of his oppression.

While they live, the raging of the enemy appears to be most frightening, but when their fury is spent and they are gone, their boasting seems to be the pitiful raving of a puny man.³

B. In the Twinkling of an Eye

Those who were to be in exile, predicts the prophet, will soon be set free, and will not die in the dungeon, nor will their bread be lacking (Isaiah 51:14).

In addition to knowing the fact that God is God, holy and mighty — not puny like man, God also knows a secret that Isaiah's people (especially the future generation that will go into exile) do not know. The secret is three-fold.

First, the coming exile would not be permanent; they would soon be set free from it. This could also be a veiled reference to the speed in which Babylon fell to Cyrus, which was overnight.

Second, the exile would be a kind of exile where the people would enjoy a limited amount of freedom and not have to waste away in a dungeon. An alternative rendering for the word "pit" or "dungeon" is "grave."

Third, in this predicted exile, their needs would be adequately met and they "will not lack bread."

C. You are My People!

How can God make such promises as He just did in 51:12–16? He can do so because of who He is and what His nature is. This is the thrust of verses 15–16, which round off this first section.

In these two verses we have two titles or names for God that both apply to the promises that God has just made. First, God is referred to as “the Lord your God.” In Hebrew, this is translated into *Adonai Elohekha*, (יהוה אלוהיך). *Adonai* (יהוה) is the personal name of God that stresses His covenant-keeping nature. God promised their swift return from exile and the comparatively little harm that would be done to them during the exile. This promise is based on His commitment to live by the Covenant, which guaranteed the eternal existence of His people despite a severe discipline for their covenant unfaithfulness.

The second name for God in these verses is *Adonai Tsavaot*, (צבאות יהוה). This title stresses God’s military capabilities. He is the Supreme Commander of the army of Heaven. This means that even though Israel would be afflicted with human oppressors, God’s army, with the Holy One at the helm, would defeat any force that puny (remember “anosh!”) man can muster. Thus, God possesses the character and the ability to keep His covenantal promises to His people.

In addition to informing us of His important and relevant titles, these verses also provide for us a significant glimpse into God’s character and ability. He is not one who merely boasts of empty titles. God is a God who has consistently proven Himself to be more than people can ask or think.

Isaiah 51:15 tells us that God is the God, Who has power to free you from exile just as He has power to rebuke the sea. “I surely have power to rebuke the nations and force them to release you!”⁴

We know that every time a storm finishes, we see the power of God to quench it. But, these words may also reflect more than just God’s continuous acts in nature. The power to “rebuke the sea” may also be a reference to their past history when God commanded the sea to roll back in order to permit their ancestors to pass through. Again, this would have reminded them of their covenantal relationship with God. It is also a veiled prophecy of One who is to come, “the Servant” who merely spoke a word and the storm on the Sea of Galilee was quenched.

In either case, whether it is the Reed Sea in the Exodus story or the Sea of Galilee, both are translations of the same Hebrew word *yam*, (ים).

In summary, this first section speaks about God’s tremendous power to control nature in order to bring forth deliverance. We see God using His power to be faithful to the Covenant He graciously made with His people. In the end, that is why He will deliver them from the promised exile.

¹ J. H. Hertz, *Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 835.

² Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament* (“BDB”), 60–61.

³ Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 1, 395.

⁴ A. I. Rosenberg, *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. 2, 414.