

Haftarah

'For the LORD will comfort Zion'

Connection

This Haftarah is the second of seven *haftarot* [plural of *haftarah*] known as 'the seven of consolation' which are read in the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year).

Background

Our haftarah is part of 'Second Isaiah' (Isaiah 40-66), i.e., a set of prophecies and traditions associated with a prophet living among the exiles in Babylon in the 6th century BCE, around the time of the decree of King Cyrus. This decree would eventually allow for the return of the Judeans exiled in Babylon to their homeland. Isaiah offers words of comfort to the people... the sadness and despair of captivity will soon turn to liberation and glory.

Reflect

- *'Can a mother forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?' (49:15).* The Hebrew word for 'womb' (*rechem*) comes from the same root as the word for 'compassion' (*rachmanut*).
- *'Your oppressors...shall be drunk with their own blood as as with wine' (49:26).* Harsh language to describe how God will reverse Israel's misfortunes.
- *'For your transgressions your mother was put away' (50:1).* The prophet says that Israel, not God, is to blame for the Israel's suffering. Exile is metaphorically described as a divorce. The maternal image appears again.
- *'The LORD God has opened my ear' (50:5).* In the figure of an obedient 'servant' the prophet describes how God is victorious. Verses 4-9 stand out from the surrounding text.
- *'Look to Abraham your father' (51:2).* The final verses of this Haftarah recall familiar Torah stories: the creation story, the garden of Eden, the call of Abraham, Sarah with child... Just as the Lord God was faithful to the blessings promised to Abraham and his descendents, so will the Lord God be faithful to the exiles.

Ponder and pray

Enjoy the poetry and passion of Isaiah's words...

Which images and ideas speak most powerfully to you? Bring one of these into your prayer time today.

Bibliography: Plaut, *The Haftarah Commentary* (NY, 1996); Sarna, ed., *The JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarot* (Philadelphia, 2002). Scripture quotations: NRSV.



Can a mother forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?

Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.

See I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.'

Isaiah 49:15-16